

SEVEN PAPERS

by

SANGHARAKSHITA

and

SUBHUTI



*May the merit gained
In my acting thus
Go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings.
My personality throughout my existences,
My possessions,
And my merit in all three ways,
I give up without regard to myself
For the benefit of all beings.
Just as the earth and other elements
Are serviceable in many ways
To the infinite number of beings
Inhabiting limitless space;
So may I become
That which maintains all beings
Situated throughout space,
So long as all have not attained
To peace.*



SEVEN PAPERS BY SANGHARAKSHITA AND SUBHUTI
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Introduction

This book presents a collection of seven recent papers by either Sangharakshita or Subhuti, or both working together. In Subhuti's words, each attempts to follow through the implications of Sangharakshita's statement, in the first paper, *What is the Western Buddhist Order?*, that the Triratna Buddhist Order is the community of his disciples and disciples of his disciples, practising according to his 'particular presentation of the Dharma'.

The papers have been released sporadically, and in different places, over the past three years. However they form a unified collection, and it therefore seemed useful to bring them together into a single volume.

As Sangharakshita himself says, introducing *What is the Western Buddhist Order?*, "Now that I am in my 84th year, I am glad to have had the opportunity of placing on record my views concerning the nature of the Order, and related topics. My replies to the questions put to me may, indeed, be seen as my Last Will and Testament for the Order, and I therefore request all Order members not only to 'read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' its contents but also to give it appropriate expression in their lives as Order members".

Lokabandhu

January, 2013

What is the Western Buddhist Order?

A Message from Bhante to the Order.¹

On 17th, 18th, and 19th March 2009, a small group of senior Order members put to me a series of questions about the nature of the Order, and related topics, and I replied to those questions. Our exchanges were recorded and I have gone through the transcript of the recording, giving clearer expression to some of the points I wished to make and cutting a few digressions which, though interesting in themselves, had no direct relation to the questions I was being asked.

Now that I am in my 84th year, I am glad to have had the opportunity of placing on record my views concerning the nature of the Order, and related topics. My replies to the questions put to me may, indeed, be seen as my Last Will and Testament for the Order, and I therefore request all Order members not only to 'read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' its contents but also to give it appropriate expression in their lives as Order members.

(Sd.) Urgyen Sangharakshita.

Madhyamaloka,

8th April 2009

Questions and Answers, 17th-19th March 2009

Q: What defines the Order?

Sangharakshita: Basically the Order can be defined as the community of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples' disciples and so on.

To understand this more fully, we have to go back into the origins of the Order. The Order began when I decided that a new Buddhist

¹ Available online at www.sangharakshita.org/What_is_the_Western_Buddhist_Order.pdf

movement was needed, initially in Britain. I was leading meditation classes and giving talks; and people came along who found that my particular presentation of the Dharma helped them to grow spiritually. That then faced me with the question of what sort of organisation we should have for these people. I was quite clear that there were two models I did not want to follow. One was that of the Buddhist Society, which simply provided a platform for teachers of various Buddhist traditions; the other that of the English Sangha Trust, which was a purely monastic model. Therefore I decided that the structure should be that of an order not a society, but an order that was neither monastic nor lay.

The difference between a society and an order was that a society required no commitment to anything, you joined by just paying a subscription, whereas an order required one to make a definite commitment. That commitment was represented, so far as I was concerned, by going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and undertaking to observe the ten precepts.

In founding the Order in this way, I was simply following an ancient pattern that we find again and again when we look at the history of Buddhism. We find that teachers arise; they study whatever Dharma teachings are available in their time; they then give their own presentation and that attracts people; and that develops into a Sangha, into a school or a tradition. At the highest level, this is the pattern that was established by the Buddha himself. He had started by trying the various practices and traditions of his time and had found them wanting. He then discovered his own solution to the problem of existence, taught it to others, and founded a Sangha for the people he attracted.

This is exactly what I have done. The Order is the community of my disciples.

Q: You say that what you have done is quite traditional. Are the various traditions and schools usually defined by a single teacher and do they continue to follow his definition over a number of generations?

S: Yes, they generally are and do. In the case of the Buddhist Sangha as a whole, that single teacher is the Buddha himself. Each of the subsidiary Sanghas, formed and reformed out of his original Sangha over the centuries, has had its single, principal teacher who is usually, but not always, the founder of that school.

The lesson of the history of Buddhism would appear to be that you need a specific 'defining' teacher for any particular Sangha. That Sangha will last as a school or tradition until it either splits or divides or becomes corrupt and disintegrates. Then a new presentation of the Dharma will be

required and a new Order will arise based upon the teaching of a new teacher.

Q: But there are, of course, other versions around of what defines the Order, or even of who defines it, especially the view that could be summed up as that the Order is what Order members collectively think it is – the Order collectively decides what the Order is.

S: I wouldn't agree with that. My version is that, directly or indirectly, I decide. The Order cannot be redefined democratically. The Order was founded by me as the community of my disciples who are practising the Dharma in accordance with my teaching. Some of those disciples are direct disciples of myself and some are disciples of my disciples and so forth, continuing into the future. But, in a sense, all are my direct disciples inasmuch as they follow my understanding of the Dharma and the general range of practices that I have taught. But of course they will have relations of more particular or personal discipleship with their own Private and Public Preceptors.

The duty of my disciples is to adhere faithfully to the teaching they have received from me, to practice faithfully in accordance with that, and to do their best to hand it faithfully on to others – and, of course, to remain in personal contact with me and with their own Preceptors, while that is possible. That is what the overwhelming majority of Order members do, I am sure.

Q: You speak of faithfulness. Could a disciple be faithful to you and your teaching while going to other teachers? Should people have to decide whether you are exclusively their teacher or not? Why shouldn't they be guided and inspired by you and by somebody else as well - what's wrong with that?

S: It is a question of being wholehearted about following and practising a teaching, especially when teachings of different teachers are so different. You can't practice them simultaneously and if you skip from one to another you never achieve any depth. Most Buddhist teachers would agree with that, regardless of their particular affiliation. They expect commitment and loyalty, which is quite traditional.

I'm not saying it's necessarily right just because other teachers have that attitude, but that my attitude is a quite traditional one. My approach stems from the nature of spiritual life itself. For commitment to be strong it has, in a sense, to be narrow. It is only through intensity of commitment and practice that you achieve any results. You will not achieve that intensity if you try to follow different teachers and their different teachings and practices, at the same time.

You need to follow a particular set of teachings and practices within a particular framework under a particular teacher in order to experience any real progress. And you must have confidence in that teacher and his teaching otherwise you will not be able to apply yourself consistently and successfully. Going to other teachers is often a sign of lack of confidence in what one already has. This is the case with at least some of our friends who are going to other teachers, although there can also be other reasons.

Q: Could not one of your own disciples in the Order simply do what you have done? Could they not, after practising your teaching under your tutelage for many years, say that they have discovered their own approach to the Dharma and now wish to teach that to other people? Would they not simply be doing the same thing as you have done?

S: Anyone who has practised within the FWBO and who finds the FWBO unsatisfactory is, of course, free to start teaching their own disciples and found their own organisation as I have done. But they would be leaving the Order. They cannot try to gather a group of disciples around themselves within the Order or movement to whom they are imparting something that is basically different from what has been taught by me.

Because, to put it in a slightly different way, every Sangha presupposes a Dharma: a particular Sangha presupposes a particular presentation of the Dharma. The Order and the FWBO presuppose the particular presentation of the Dharma which I have given over the years.

Q: Can you make 'particular presentation of the Dharma' more precise? Is Dharma not just Dharma.

S: Yes, but the Dharma needs to be made specific to a particular Sangha. It needs to hang together, doctrinally and methodologically, if it is to be the basis of a Sangha or Order. Everybody needs to be following the same founding teacher, be guided by the same doctrinal understanding of the Dharma, and undertaking broadly the same set of practices. If they do not do that they will not have sufficient in common to be an effective Sangha and will not be able to make progress together on the Path.

My particular presentation consists of those teachings and practices I have stressed during my teaching life, through speaking and writing, and I hope by example. What I have taught pertains both to doctrinal understanding and to practice and it is what I have said about these that is the basis for the Dharma as practised by my disciples in the Order and as taught by them – the basis of our 'particular presentation of the Dharma'.

At the doctrinal level, I see the teaching of pratitya-samutpada as most basic and from it follow the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve and Twenty-Four Nidanas, and also the teachings concerning

Nirvana, anatman, and sunyata. My teaching of Dharma as doctrine is essentially based upon and derived from, directly or indirectly, these teachings that, of course, go back to the Buddha himself. And I explicitly exclude whatever ideas are incompatible with them.

My teachings pertaining to method, and therefore those of my disciples, all centre, directly or indirectly, on the act of going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These comprise all the practices that I have myself taught: for instance, the observance of the Five or Ten Precepts; the performance of the Sevenfold and Threefold Pujas; the practise of meditation, in the framework of the System of Meditation; the group study of the Buddhist scriptures; the cultivation of spiritual friendship, and the enjoyment of poetry, music, and the visual arts as aids to the spiritual life. These teachings pertaining to method are connected, directly or indirectly, with the Buddha's teaching of pratitya-samutpada through the sequence of positive, spiral nidanas, for all these teachings contribute, in one way or another, to my disciples' progress to ever higher levels of being and consciousness, even from the mundane at its most refined to the transcendental. Looked at from another point of view, they contribute to the deepening of my disciples' going for refuge, so that from being provisional it becomes effective, and from being effective it becomes real in the sense of being irreversible.

One could also explore my particular presentation of the Dharma in terms of the Six Distinctive Emphases of the FWBO; to give their headings: critical ecumenicalism, unity, Going for Refuge, Spiritual Friendship, the New Society, and culture and the arts. Of these, my emphasis on Going for Refuge is the most essential and probably the most distinctive. The others too are distinctive, for instance, the emphasis on the importance of spiritual friendship is certainly not explicitly taught by any other Buddhist school.

These teachings and emphases, together with the range of institutions I have established, between them create something not really definable: a certain atmosphere or attitude that is found within the FWBO and nowhere else. All of them are contained in a network of spiritual friendship and they are to be handed on faithfully from generation to generation in a chain of discipleship.

An Order member remains truly an Order member because he or she accepts that definition and works within it – and I mean accepts it effectively, through real understanding of my teaching, active practice of the methods I have taught or sanctioned, and diligent participation in the life of the Order I have founded. This is what the great majority of Order members try to do.

The great danger for the Order in future will be that there are people who are in fact no longer members of the Order in this effective sense, who are no longer my disciples following my teaching, but who remain members of the Order in name because of confusion in their thinking or in that of the Order members around them, or because it is convenient for them to be seen as an Order member. They have, perhaps, got lots of contacts in the Order and movement, they can take classes and build up their own little circle, so they retain their membership. Or the movement is the social context in which they have been for so many years and simple inertia keeps them in it.

Q: But didn't you yourself have eight teachers, Bhante? Why shouldn't we?

S: Those eight teachers were not my teachers in the sense that I am your teacher, because I didn't then belong to an order in the same way that Order members do now. When I was ordained, my principal motivation was not to join an order; it was to be a monk or bhikkhu, and to be recognised as such. I saw the monk as the full-time practitioner, which is what I wanted to be and had been trying to be for the previous couple of years. That is not, of course, how I see things now, especially since I have seen many monks who weren't really practitioners at all.

In a certain sense, I was still 'shopping around' at that time, still trying to make spiritual sense of what was available to me. The situation of Order members is quite different because they are understood to have done their shopping around before they even became mitras. When someone becomes a mitra, under the new arrangements, they declare that they wish to practice the Dharma within the context of the FWBO, and that means they have stopped looking elsewhere. So Order members belong to an order and have chosen this particular order rather than any other that might be on offer. And choosing this Order means choosing me as your teacher and not shopping around for others outside the Order.

However, the fact that I am the teacher of the Order does not mean that Order members cannot learn a lot from others within the Sangha. Recently someone wrote in his letter resigning from the Order that it is a great weakness of the Order that it only has one teacher, but the matter is not so simple. Another Order member responded in Shabda rather beautifully: she made quite clear that her spiritual allegiance lies with me, but she then wrote very movingly about all the other people she had learned from. She pointed out that, in a sense, there is only one teacher, which is me: but one also learns from one's Preceptors and those who take study and lead classes and so on. So there is not one teacher in the Order in the sense that that ex-Order member meant. Here perhaps one has to distinguish between

the principal, founding, defining teacher of one's particular Sangha, school, or tradition and one's own particular and immediate teachers within that Sangha.

Q: On the Refuge Tree that you devised for the Order, besides your eight teachers, are the sixteen teachers of the past. Each of these teachers founded or continued a particular tradition, most of which are still active today. Can we draw from those particular traditions? Do their teachings constitute part of your presentation of the Dharma?

S: No, not put so simply. We need to see what I had in mind when I devised the Refuge Tree and placed those Teachers of the Past on it. I included them because I wanted to give people an idea of the very rich historical background against which we practise. I therefore selected the most prominent teachers of the past, especially those who had been founders of schools or important traditions. But these figures do not represent our lineage in the way that figures on a Nyingmapa or Gelugpa refuge tree would be their lineage.

We cannot look at them as our lineage because they belonged to different traditions and functioned within different frameworks with different notions about the Path and therefore progress on the Path. For instance, for Buddhaghosha the Path was the Path to Arahantship; then Tsongkapa thought in terms of the Mahayana Path to Full Enlightenment, which meant traversing the ten Bodhisattva bhumis throughout a succession of lives, spanning three asankhyeyas of kalpas; and then those of the teachers that followed the Vajrayana had a different conception of the Mahayana Path to Full Enlightenment, because they believed that it can be telescoped into seven, or even less, lifetimes through esoteric practices.

How can one determine how all these teachers of the past are related to one another if there is no common framework of reference? How can one judge their relative spiritual attainments, if there is no conception of the path common to them all? It would be rather naïve, in the circumstances, to regard them all as equally enlightened. I have come to the conclusion that we can't really work it out satisfactorily and that there is no need to try. I regard the Teachers of the Past as what I call, 'Buddhist religious geniuses', who made a contribution to the Buddhist life of their times in various ways, but not one that I necessarily accept, in all respects.

Just because a figure appears on the Refuge Tree doesn't mean that what he taught can be taught at an FWBO centre. It may be that it can, if there is something that is useful and compatible with our particular presentation of the Dharma, but not necessarily. In the case of Dogen, for instance, we must acknowledge that much of Far Eastern Buddhism,

especially Japanese Zen, seems to have been greatly influenced by something of a Vedantic character, which therefore calls into doubt the complete orthodoxy of all of Dogen's teachings in that some may depart from the Buddha's fundamental teachings of pratyutpanna samutpada and anatman.

So these figures are on our tree because they represent our historical background - even if it is, in certain respects, a flawed history. We are not going for refuge to them. Our refuges are the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha: Shakyamuni being the Buddha, the books of the scriptures representing the Dharma, and the Bodhisattvas and the Arahants representing the Sangha. When we prostrate, saying, 'To the best of all refuges I go', we are going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. At the same time, we are paying our respects to the Teachers of the Past, who contributed in one way or other to the history of Buddhism - sometimes doctrinally, sometimes organisationally, sometimes rightly and perhaps sometimes wrongly. In bowing to them, we are aware of that historical background. It's our religious hinterland, as it were, even if in certain respects some of their teachings may be flawed or even questionably Buddhist. Of course, one might find some of their particular teachings very useful, although one would need to look carefully and critically to see how these would fit in with the teaching we follow in the Order.

One can certainly respect the teachers of the past and one might have very strong feelings towards some of them. We can allow ourselves to be inspired by their lives, in certain respects. For example, when Atisha was invited to Tibet, we are told that he consulted the Bodhisattva Tara and she said, 'If you go to Tibet, your life will be shortened by twelve years', but he chose to go anyway. That is an admirable example of someone's willingness to sacrifice part of his life for the sake of spreading the Dharma. But that does not mean we necessarily follow any particular teaching that Atisha gave - although it is at least possible that we may find aspects of his teaching useful. It is the same with Hsuan Tsang. We can admire his courage in going all the way from China to India for the sake of the Dharma, but that does not mean we necessarily follow his interpretation of the Vijñānavāda.

Thus we can respect their achievement in some contexts without necessarily agreeing with them wholeheartedly; and even differing from them in some respects. In other words, we need to take a rather more critical attitude. Just because a teacher is there on our tree does not necessarily mean that their teaching can be taught in our centres.

Q: Does that apply in a similar way to the teachers of the present?

S: Yes, though the case is somewhat different insofar as I had a personal relationship with them and was free to discuss their teaching with them. As to where my teachers stood spiritually, I have always said I have no view about that. I regarded them as more spiritually experienced, more advanced than myself, and that was enough for me. I did not try to locate them on any particular scale. To make my point, I tell that story about three of my teachers, one of whom said in reply to a question, 'One of us is more advanced than the other two, but you people will never know which one it is'!

Q: But are you not expecting something different of us in relation to you? To what extent are we at liberty to disagree with what you teach?

S: That depends on whether you mean liberty as a disciple or as a human being. As a human being you are at liberty to disagree, but if you disagree beyond a certain point as a disciple you cease to be a disciple. Of course, I don't expect people to follow blindly and uncritically whatever I have said or taught, but I expect them to take me very seriously and think very carefully about it, as most Order members do. If Order members find themselves disagreeing with me on significant issues, I expect them to discuss that with me, while I am still available, or with their own teachers within the Order. Otherwise being a disciple doesn't mean very much.

Q: Some people are arguing that we should be 'going beyond Bhante'. We have benefited from your teaching and guidance in the past, but now we should have a critical perspective on your teaching, they say. They want to separate out teachings they agree with, from teachings they don't agree with. Or they are looking at your earlier teachings in relation to your later and detecting what they consider to be inconsistencies. They suggest this critical approach is necessary.

S: A disciple should be critical, but a lot of what passes for criticism these days is not criticism in the way that I understand it. True criticism in relation to a teacher should be part of an effort actually to understand, rather than simply accepting out of blind faith. A true understanding cannot but be critical in this sense. But the criticism should take place in the context of an assumption that something is being said by the teacher that is of spiritual significance. If you cannot make sense of what your teacher says or cannot agree with it, you should first assume that you may have misunderstood or not got it clear yet, and then you should try to understand through intelligent, critical discussion and enquiry. If you cannot make that assumption you have probably already ceased to be a disciple.

Q: One of the critical distinctions being made by some people at the moment is between what you have to say on the Dharma, and what you

say, for instance, on men and women or on social questions such as single sex, lifestyle and so on. So it might be said that Sangharakshita is my teacher when he is talking about the Noble Eightfold Path, but not when he is emphasising the renunciation of family life or whatever.

S: Well, the Buddha also emphasised renunciation of family life, so I can point back to the Buddha's own teaching and example, as well as having my own views about the best kind of lifestyle for practising and teaching the Dharma. However I also say that commitment is primary and lifestyle is secondary. So although I do emphasise the importance of single sex communities, I certainly do not say that someone not living in a single sex community cannot make substantial spiritual progress. Nor do I say that a disciple who decides not to live in a single sex community is necessarily an unfaithful disciple - it would depend on that disciple's motives and attitude.

Q: Let's take perhaps the most contentious issue there has been, which is the issue of men and women and their respective aptitudes or whatever. There are people who have come to a definite conclusion that they do not agree with you. So, how does that affect their discipleship, as far as you are concerned?

S: I regard that as a difference of opinion that does not affect their discipleship. Although my view of the matter does come from my personal experience and relates to the Buddhist tradition through the ages, it is not scientifically demonstrable, as far as I know.

In addition, even supposing that women had less spiritual aptitude than men, at least in the early stages of their spiritual life, the whole weight of current popular opinion is so strongly against such a view, that it would be wise not to insist on it, since it is not critical to someone's practice of the Dharma, and one doesn't want to discourage anybody without good reason. Thus, if someone believed that men and women have perfectly equal spiritual aptitudes, that would not be incompatible with their being my disciple.

It is worth saying also that an Order member is not obliged to believe that men and women are exactly equal in their spiritual aptitudes.

Q: Suppose someone were to say they were completely against the 'single sex idea'?

S: That would be a much more serious matter. To be against all single sex activities is much too doctrinaire. Just this morning I heard a program on the radio about the history of feminism and, amongst other things, the contributors were celebrating the fact that women could have their own space. They were saying that there are certain things that women cannot

discuss if men are present. It seems to be generally acknowledged that women need their own space sometimes, as do men. If someone was actively propagating their rejection of single sex activities and, say, discouraging people from going on single sex retreats, that would surely bring his or her membership of the Order into question.

The difference between the case of the relative aptitudes of men and women and the case of single sex activities is that the former is my observation, which I cannot prove and which has little bearing on the actual practice of the Dharma, whereas the latter is something that I specifically recommend to my disciples for their spiritual benefit. I strongly recommend to everyone that they make sure there is a significant single sex element in their lives, especially with regard to single sex communities, retreats, chapters, etc. If someone says this is not necessary, they are not taking me seriously as a teacher and that must put their membership of the Order into question.

Q: Although this is not a distinctive part of your own teaching, let me ask it here. Order members have been asking what is it acceptable for them to believe or not believe as regards Rebirth. To what extent is non-belief compatible with membership of the Order.

S: My teaching is firmly based on the basic teachings of the Buddha, especially as found in the Pali canon, and 'Rebirth', to call it that, is found there. Rebirth is therefore part of the essential teachings on which the Order is based, so, you cannot be an Order member and say that there is no such thing. You cannot, as an Order member, be asserting a view that contradicts the universal Buddhist tradition and that the Buddha appears to have entertained. You are not obliged to actually believe that there is rebirth, but you cannot categorically assert that there is no such thing.

Q: Can you think of other important views of yours that we can clarify whether or not they are necessary to membership of the Order?

S: I have said that I don't think that the Order or movement should be Sangharakshita writ large; by which I mean that my own particularities of character and interest should not determine other people's interests. For instance, in my own case, I haven't had any particular interest in the sciences, but I am certainly not saying that is not a valid area of interest for Order members and others in the movement. In fact I have tried to encourage more interest in the sciences, but with limited success. I would consider that as probably my major personal limitation that was not to be followed.

Q: Suppose there was someone, in that connection, who did not agree with your teaching of the Higher Evolution?

S: It depends what exactly they disagree with. If they disagree with the whole of modern science and are asserting creationism or the like, that is one thing, because they are coming into conflict with basic principles of the Dharma. If however they disagree with how I align evolution with the Dharma, that is another matter. I wouldn't say that an Order member is obliged to find what I have to say about the higher evolution of man an acceptable presentation of the Dharma: it being presumed that they do accept what else I have said about the spiritual path and are practising that. But I know that some people from the very beginning of the movement have had difficulties with the language of the higher evolution and have dropped it, and that has not affected their discipleship with me.

Q: Some people recently have been comparing what you said early on in the history of the movement with what you have been saying more recently. They allege that there is a definite and substantial difference.

S: It seems some have been quoting Sangharakshita against Sangharakshita! It is inevitable that my views on various issues should have shifted a little in the course of almost sixty years of teaching, if we include my earliest writings like the Survey. People have to try to see the development of my thought, to the extent there is development, as a totality over the whole period of my teaching life. And it is not just a question of being aware of that development of thought, but of recognising that I have addressed different situations and contexts and different audiences in different terms. One cannot just pit one quotation against another.

Q: It has been said that now you are stressing your own 'particular presentation of the Dharma' whereas in your talk, Is a Guru really necessary?, given in the early days of the movement, you said that the Buddha has no view, no philosophy, no system of thought....

S: To pit what I said in that talk against what I have been saying more recently is like pitting what the Buddha said in the Attakavaga of the Sutta Nipata against, for instance, his teaching in the suttas of the Majjhima Nikaya. The Buddha himself said different things to different people on different occasions, according to the needs of those people and the needs of the situation – and no doubt according to his own inspiration.

It is true that the Buddha had no view - in the sense of something to which he was attached in an egoistic way. I've sometimes pointed out that in the Buddhist texts a distinction can be seen between wrong views, right views, and no views. But you don't attain to the realisation of no view without taking your stand on right view. Or to put the matter in terms of Nagarjuna's thinking, the paramartha satya does not abolish the samvriti

satya. In effect, taking your stand upon the samvriti satya, you realise the paramartha satya.

The guru responds to people spontaneously, nonetheless, behind his various responses, there is something that unites them all. They are not completely random and unrelated. And he establishes institutions within which that sort of spontaneous connection can take place and be properly understood. That is the way to resolve the apparent contradiction between what I said in that talk and some of the things I have been saying more recently about the importance to the Order of my particular presentation of the Dharma.

In this case there is no inconsistency of substance. It is a question of really understanding what the two positions mean. But, to take the general issue of consistency, let me be a little provocative and quote two authors: Blake says, 'A man who never changes his opinion is like standing water and breeds reptiles of the mind'; then Emerson declares that 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds'. I do not claim to be completely consistent. I think it is unreasonable for anyone to expect me to be, over a period of sixty years, completely consistent in everything I've said or written.

Q: Really the issue is not so much to do with the specifics of what you've said on particular occasions, but that it is said that you were very radical in the early days and are now much more conservative. To begin with, so it is asserted, your attitude was an entirely open one: for instance, you said in about 1972, 'The only thing that can't be changed is Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels'; whereas now your stress is on conserving your particular body of teachings, practices and institutions.

S: But what did I mean when I said, 'The only thing that cannot be changed is Going For Refuge'? It was not intended to mean that 'Anything can be changed, it doesn't matter', but to highlight the extreme importance of Going for Refuge. This is an example of a well known rhetorical device, especially in the Indian tradition: you highlight or praise something in an exaggerated way to emphasise its extreme importance, but what you say is not to be taken literally. Sometimes I do speak a little provocatively to get people thinking, like when I said, 'An Order member without a chapter is only half an Order member'. Clearly it would be absurd to take that literally.

I remember the occasion when I gave that answer, 'The only thing that cannot be changed is Going For Refuge'. It was while I was in retreat in Cornwall and I was asked, 'What can be changed, Bhante?' Immediately the thought came into my mind, 'Oh dear! We've only been going six years and already they are thinking of changing things!'

It's not a question of pitting one unrelated quote against another - that's just the kind of polemics you see in politics; it's not serious. My thought has to be seen over the years and seen in its totality. There certainly have been changes, for instance, I see the Tibetan Triyana model now very differently to how I saw it some years ago. There have also been changes of emphasis. So, we must acknowledge at least some changes in my thinking over the years, but there is certainly continuity. I illustrated that in one particular area in *A History of my Going For Refuge* and perhaps it could be illustrated in other areas as well.

Q: At Madhyamaloka there has been some discussion of your use in the early days of a particular kind of 'capitalised' philosophical language and terminology, for example, 'The Absolute' and 'The Unconditioned' and so on. It seems to suggest something rather eternalistic. Would you want to use that now?

S: These are examples of what I call poetic terminology and what David Brazier, in *The New Buddhism*, calls rhetoric. And it is a terminology I would be unlikely to use now, having learned from experience to be a bit careful and realising possibilities of misunderstanding are greater than I had thought. When reading my work, one must always look carefully at the context and try to understand what is being said in that context. In these cases, I don't think my fundamental understanding has changed at all. I did not mean anything eternalistic when I used that language, even if it is perhaps too easily understood in that way.

Q: Say a member of the Order heard that other Buddhist teachers were coming to a nearby city, just as your teachers came to Kalimpong, and decided to sit at their feet as well as sitting at yours. What would you say to that?

S: Well, one might ask, why? If you want to practise the Dharma, you've got enough to be getting on with already. What is the nature of your interest in these other teachers? You might think that you could learn something new and different from them, but what you learned would most likely be just a source of confusion for you. If one was firmly established in one's own practice and had faith in one's teachers within the Order then one would not go off sitting at the feet of other teachers in that way. And most Order members do not do that.

Q: Isn't there an argument that in some cases, some of our central teachings can be augmented by voices from other sources within other traditions while remaining faithful to our own framework of teachings ?

S: I think it is difficult to do that. If you go to a teacher outside the movement, you don't usually get just the one particular teaching you want. Along with him comes the tradition to which he belongs and that informs what he says about the teaching that you are interested in. You can hardly involve yourself with him to any extent without becoming involved in his tradition. You will then find yourself immersed in a whole package that is unlikely to fit smoothly with the framework we have within the Order and that will therefore take you out of the Order. It is safer to go to books for particular teachings, because you can read critically and take what you want. You can also discuss the book with other Order members.

Q: Are there not things we can learn from other Buddhist groups, without compromising our own system? For instance, to take a somewhat marginal example, some people in the Rigpa Sangha have given a lot of detailed attention to the support of the dying. There does not seem to be any conflict of principle for us in learning from them.

S: There have been several examples recently of Order members helping their own dying friends or relations through that experience. That does seem to be a natural part of the Order's life. So there could be no objection to a group of people within our Sangha, on the basis of their existing commitment as Order members and without prejudice to it, devoting themselves to this work in the same way that people within the Rigpa Sangha have done.

If they wanted to see what they could learn about this particular matter from others outside the Order, whether the Rigpa people or anyone else, there are a number of considerations that should be borne in mind. They should be very sure about their basic commitment to the Order and their understanding of its principles. They should consider carefully their own motivation: is their interest in investigating what others are doing a sign of restlessness or dissatisfaction, as we have found in a number of such cases, or is it a desire to enhance our collective life and practice, while respecting our own framework of understanding? They would certainly need to have thoroughly discussed all this with their Preceptors and spiritual friends and been very open to what they had to say.

They would also need to consider whether what they wanted to investigate was something genuinely worthwhile, especially given everything else we have to do. Maybe a list needs to be drawn up of the sort of investigations that are considered useful. People might have all sorts of different ideas about what might be valuable to bring back into the Order and that would need assessing and prioritising.

Before such investigations take place, guidelines and procedures need to be worked out for their conduct and for the assimilation of whatever

emerges from them. I laid down some principles for this in my talk on The Five Pillars of the FWBO, in which I referred to the Pillar of Experiment. I spoke of experimentation being conducted by a small group of senior Order members and the results being communicated afterwards to the rest of the Order and Movement. I did not mean that anybody could do what they felt like doing and call it an experiment. To give an example, if it seems that a particular meditation that we don't already practice may be of use, then let a small group of senior and experienced Order members try it and see what the results are. The exact mechanisms for this the Public Preceptors will have to decide upon, no doubt in consultation with the Chairmen or others.

Q: Quite a few Order members have been to Buddhist teachers outside the Order and consider that they have derived benefit from that, to varying degrees. Some would say they've gained something spiritually important that was not available to them in the Order. How does that affect their discipleship with you and therefore their membership of the Order?

S: People who I have ordained should, as a matter of courtesy, consult me before going to another teacher – or they should consult their own Preceptors, if I did not ordain them. That is the traditional thing to do. In a very few cases, people have consulted me, but I am a little surprised that most have not – I don't know whether other Preceptors are consulted or not.

However, even when people have come to see me about going to another teacher or taking up a practice or teaching I have not taught, very rarely are they asking me in the spirit of being prepared to follow whatever I say, whether it be 'Yes' or 'No'. Very often, they are really seeking my approval for what they have already more or less decided to do. They are not prepared to accept 'No', if that is what I happen to say. I can only remember one person consulting me and definitely taking 'No' for an answer.

Q: So, given that there are quite a number of Order members in the West who have gone to other teachers, what should they do now, Bhante? From what you have just said, many of them are, in a sense, in an irregular position. How should they regularise it?

S: It would be good if that could be rectified as soon as possible. If those who have not consulted, or have consulted but without really being prepared to accept 'No', want to regularise their position, they should come and see me or their own Preceptors and make their position clear. In the first place, they should affirm that, even though they have taken some teachings from elsewhere, their heart is definitely with me and with the Order and FWBO.

Generally speaking, that is the key question: where is one's primary allegiance or loyalty? It is in principle possible to learn things from teachers from traditions outside the FWBO and bring that back into one's own practice and the practice of the Order. But one must be careful that one does not get so absorbed in what one has learned that one ends up identifying more and more with the tradition from which it comes and moving away from the Order, as has happened in two or three cases.

However, people need to be clear it is not simply a matter of where their hearts lie, what they feel about it. One should resist the tendency to fudge – to try to have one's cake and eat it too. Because there is the larger question of how whatever they have learned fits into the total pattern of my teaching and therefore of the Order's teaching. Probably many people would not be aware of that and would not be able to work it out. They would need to do that in dialogue with their Preceptors and other senior Order members who really understand the issues.

Q: One of the most problematic issues connected with other teachers concerns the question of tathagatagarbha, Buddha nature etc. I've spoken to a number of Order members who have said that, while they do not attach importance to tathagatagarbha as a metaphysical doctrine, they found an approach that emphasises the natural purity of the mind, whether deriving from Dzog Chen, Mahamudra or whatever, spiritually liberating. Someone told me that, when they were introduced to this idea on a non-FWBO retreat, for the first time they experienced a positive perspective on the spiritual life – which they had not got from their previous experience of being taught within the movement. These are Westerners who seem to be speaking with complete sincerity and genuineness and who feel some pain because they understand that this is bringing them into conflict with what they understand to be your views – and they have otherwise no quarrel with you.

S: The criterion is, did they give up practising? If they don't give up practising they are saying in effect that tathagatagarbha is a potentiality, not something you possess in the here and now. It seems that there are two traditions of tathagatagarbha. One says tathagatagarbha represents potentiality. The other tradition asserts that tathagatagarbha is somehow actually present within one here and now. It is the second of these two versions of tathagatagarbha that I criticise as eternalism, not the first, which speaks in terms of potentiality.

As long as tathagatagarbha is used as a language of potentiality, used in a poetic, metaphorical, or even rhetorical way to indicate potentiality and to encourage faith and confidence, it's not too much of a problem. However, it has a tendency to slide into something metaphysical. If it is

made into something metaphysical, it leads to the undercutting of practice. Indeed, it becomes a form of antinomianism, where it may even be asserted that the precepts are unnecessary.

This antinomianism is, it seems, present in some aspects of Far Eastern Buddhism. I have recently been reading David Brazier's book, as well as *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, edited by Jamie Hubbard and Paul Swanson, which is about a Japanese movement called 'Critical Buddhism'. Both these books make it clear that there is much about Zen that is not truly Buddhist. In some ways it's quite startling. David Brazier writes about Yasutani Roshi, a very prominent twentieth century master, and that is really quite an eye opener; almost horrific in some ways. Yasutani Roshi, supposedly an enlightened Zen master, supposedly having received full transmission coming all the way down from Shakyamuni, actively supported Japanese imperialism and wrote violently anti-Semitic books. Some forms of Zen or of Dzog Chen or Mahamudra, as some forms of Vedanta, would seem to claim there is no difference between skilful and unskilful, because both have the same basis in the Buddha Nature or whatever. Then there is no need for effort or practice, no need for renunciation, etc.

One must therefore be careful one does not get too far from the Buddha's thought. Even if one can speak metaphorically of one's ultimate purity, one still must transform the greed, hatred, and delusion in one's mind, as the Buddha repeatedly taught. And you have to make ethical judgements.

If some people say that the language of tathagatagarbha has been helpful to them, one cannot deny their experience. The question is, what do they make of that experience, where do they place it in a broader context? It is not possible to comment further without knowing who taught them or exactly what was said, what the emphasis was in any particular case. Of course, if people are concerned that they may be in conflict with what I have taught, they should come and see me.

Q: What happens if people do learn something outside the Order, without discussion with you and without going through any sort of process of assimilation, and then practice it and teach it to others, whether at a centre or not? What is their position?

S: To be blunt, I see them as going outside the Order, assuming what they teach or even just practice is not compatible with the teaching we have within the Order, or has not been made compatible. If they were to teach as important or central something that was incompatible with what I see as basic Buddhist teaching that would put them outside the Order. In the end there are certain doctrinal understandings and practical expressions

of those understandings that are fundamental to membership of the Order. Fortunately I doubt if many are in this position, if any at all.

Q: On what basis should we accommodate other practices and why? What variety do you need, how many different practices are necessary for a full spiritual life.

S: I've always emphasised going more deeply into what one has, rather than trying to accumulate a whole array of practices. What we've already got is, broadly speaking, sufficient. We've got Mindfulness of Breathing and Mettabhavana, we've got awareness in general, the Four Satti-patthanas, the Four Brahmaviharas, the preliminary practices, the Six Element practice, and so forth. There is so much there to be got on with. I think some people want something new without having a full acquaintance with what already is available. One must admit, however, that sometimes these practices are perhaps not presented in a sufficiently imaginative or inspired way.

In principle, though, there is probably hardly any practice from the Buddhist tradition that cannot be accommodated in our system. But whatever practice one does it needs to be fitted in and practised within the overall framework. In some cases this may require very careful thought and quite a bit of trimming of elements from their original contexts so that they can be placed in our system. For instance, many practices coming from the Tibetan traditions will have very strong buried assumptions about the Triyana, which will need to be dealt with.

There is the question of where the so called 'formless practice' fits in – although I've never been too sure what that means, it's always seemed a bit vague to me. To the extent that I've understood what people are talking about, I've always regarded it as an extension of the Just Sitting that I have taught from the beginning. Some people have put more and more emphasis on that, having found it useful. However, one must be very careful to practise it in the context of the overall System of Meditation: one should not practise Just Sitting on its own - it has to be alternated with periods of making an effort through one of the other practices, as I described in that talk on the System of Meditation. I doubt very much whether Just Sitting or 'Pure Awareness', as it is termed, will take you all the way by itself, and it seems to leave quite a bit of room for self-delusion.

Then there are the broader issues of making sure that there is a high degree of commonality about the practices that all Order members are engaged in. If everybody is doing different practices it becomes harder and harder to have a sense that we are one Order, as some people begin to feel more and more allegiance to the group of those who do their own

particular form of practice. In addition, the more variety of practice there is, the harder it will be for people to find guidance in their practice from more experienced practitioners within the Order. We are a united spiritual community and so we need to keep a common body of practice, a common vocabulary of practice, without unnecessary or whimsical variety.

Q: I know it can't be all buttoned down, but at the same time it still seems too loose to me. I'm not quite clear yet what criteria we should use. On what basis should we judge whether or not people can learn and then teach something new, especially from teachers outside the Order?

S: In discussing this with anyone, we should start with some investigation of motives. Have they really engaged with the practices and teachings already available? Often people want to learn something new because they have not got on well with what they already have, and that very often needs going into. There may be some personal factor at work there that needs sorting out.

Similarly, if they want to teach something new, we need to ask why are they so keen to teach it? Do they just want to be a teacher, gather a little circle around them? And so forth.

Secondly, we need to look at their relationship to teachers, kalyana mitras, and preceptors in the Order, if they have them. They may be looking for, or even needing, some guidance in their spiritual life and practice and that may attract them to learning from other teachers. They may have misunderstandings or confusions about the way to do the present practices, perhaps because they have not been taught very well. We then need to investigate why they have not found that guidance within the Order and see if we can help them to do so. Thus we need to make sure that the motivation is healthy and that everything is going well generally in that person's spiritual life and their membership of the Order and that they have the guidance they need.

Then, if all this has been clarified and we think that there is some real spiritual benefit to be gained from the particular teaching being learned and then taught, that needs to be brought to the attention of the Public Preceptors and they should arrange for it to be looked into more closely.

The Public Preceptors need to discuss these matters very carefully, if necessary with me, and come up with some way of sorting out what is valuable from what is not. They need to evolve very clear and effective procedures. Other Order members need to cooperate with them to that end and not just react to authority or whatever – most of us are rather too old for that! Again, I am sure that the great majority of Order members would

have no difficulty with co-operating with the Public Preceptors and would happily support them in the carrying out of their various responsibilities.

Q: Why is it that the Public Preceptors are the ones to set up a system for integrating innovations in spiritual practice?

The Public Preceptors are the spiritually senior-most Order members and they are the Preceptors to all I have not myself ordained. They are therefore the most competent in this particular area. They would not necessarily have to do it all themselves: they could appoint others they considered best qualified for any particular purpose. And they would need to consult with other Order members carrying weighty responsibilities, such as the Chairmen and Chairwomen.

Q: There are those who are questioning the position of the Public Preceptors in the Movement. They are questioning whether this is the best way for the Order to decide who gets ordained or to decide who decides who gets ordained.

S: Well, what are the alternatives? You cannot have people selected according to simple seniority, because that would not necessarily produce the right people for the responsibility. Public Preceptors don't come out of thin air: they come from the ranks of the existing Order, usually after being a Private Preceptor first, and previously having been a kalyana mitra and having taught at a centre and led retreats and so on. People move up through the system as they are seen by others, and especially by those carrying a responsibility, to be qualified to take it on themselves. If some senior Order members haven't moved up through the system, presumably there is a good explanation for that: either they don't want to function in that way or they are not suited to it or ready for it, for one reason or another.

The other alternative would be a democratic system, but you cannot vote people into this sort of spiritual responsibility. Just because someone has the largest number of votes does not mean he or she is spiritually qualified. The majority of Order members do not yet have the experience to make the judgement of who is ready to take the responsibility of Preceptor. Of course, the comments of any Order member who knows the person concerned should be carefully considered by those who do have to make that decision, and that is why the Public Preceptors have established a consultation process for new Preceptors.

There would also be practical difficulties about voting. For instance, all Order members would have to be able to know the candidates. And the whole Order would have to be involved, very much including the Indian part, which would present all sorts of other problems. If you regionalised

the process it would become very hard to maintain the overall geographical unity of the Order and movement. When it came to electing new Preceptors, the candidates would have to put themselves forward, they would have to have their own publicity machines and so on. Sooner or later you would have canvassing and hustings, party and faction, and so forth. I have the history of the Theosophical Society in mind as a warning of just how dreadful this would be: in its early days it was a smaller organisation than we have now and there was vigorous campaigning for election to the presidency, and all sorts of charges and counter charges were made against the various candidates. In short, how could Public Preceptors be voted for by the whole Order? I think it would be wrong both in theory and in practice. I won't say the present system is infallible, but I can't think of a better one.

Q: What about the position of the College in the overall architecture of the Order and movement?

The Public Preceptors, because of their spiritual responsibilities, clearly have the key position in that architecture, but there are various groupings of senior Order members who have overlapping responsibilities that, between them, cover the whole Order and movement: Public Preceptors, Private Preceptors, Chairmen and Chairwomen, Presidents (the office of President, it seems, needs reinstituting), Order Convenors, Mitra Convenors, Chapter Convenors. There needs to be some liaison between them all so they are not each just going their separate ways or coming into some sort of conflict. I know that a process of liaison has been started and I am hoping that that will result in much clearer collective objectives for those particular bodies and perhaps some overall structure. We definitely need such a structure if we are to be effective and we need even some sort of head-quarters at which that structure is focused.

Talking of objectives, we need to be careful what we mean and in what context we are speaking. It is all right to formulate objectives, as I have just suggested, for spreading the Dharma, for instance: where and how we should do it. But I sometimes get asked what I see as the future direction of the Order. I find that a very odd sort of question. It's almost as though we are a political party: the objective of a political party is to gain or keep power and everything is mobilised to that end. We don't have a finite end in that sense. I therefore think that it is entirely a pseudo-question: all I can say in response to it is, 'I see all members of the Order seeking to deepen their practice of the Dharma and to spread the Movement'. If one wanted to be grandiose, one could say, 'Our objective is Enlightenment and that is the direction we are moving in'.

Q: In what you have said so far, Bhante, there is a strong emphasis on what might be called conservation: making sure that the Order remains faithful to its founding principles, embodied in the teachings, practices, and institutions established by you. In your interview with Mahamati, shown at the Bodhgaya Order Convention, you mentioned an, as it were, balancing factor to conservation: development – responding creatively to new circumstances and needs. Why are you stressing conservation here and not development?

S: The general mood of the times favours constant innovation and that influences us - and the mood has to be resisted. There is, however, room for development - depending what one means by development. If it means considering a new way of communicating the Dharma, that is to be encouraged: the development of Buddhafield was an example of that. It may be useful for there to be developments in terms of the medium used and the manner of presentation. But there should not be any development that is inconsistent with what teachings, practices, and institutions we already have and there should not be innovation in terms of principles.

Although I certainly see an important place for development in this sense, I feel the need to stress sticking to our basic principles and basing ourselves firmly in my particular presentation of the Dharma. That is because I detect, within the Order and Movement at present, that the voices raised loudest seem to be in favour of, what could be called, innovation. I don't hear equally strong and numerous voices being raised in favour of conservation, to call it that. I therefore see that innovation is the current danger, especially in view of the general climate around us and the craze for what is new and different - the new for new's sake.

Q: I suppose a few people may be talking about doing things differently because they do not have confidence either in the results they have had from their own practice or in their understanding of what the Order is, or in your teachings. What would you say to them?

S: It is difficult to generalise: it depends who is saying that. In many cases, one might just say, 'You need to practice harder' or 'You need to practice within more supportive conditions' – because people often put themselves in situations that are not at all supportive of their practice of the Dharma and then are surprised that they do not make progress and blame the movement or the practices they are doing. But, if they are convinced, after discussion with me and with their other teachers in the Order, that they are not finding the FWBO and its principles and practices of any use to them in their spiritual lives then they had better leave the Order and look elsewhere.

Q: Someone has recently been asserting that ours is not yet a real Buddhist Order, because we don't have the teachings and the guidance to gain Insight and that we'll have to sort that out once Bhante has gone. Is it possible to gain Insight within the Order and movement? Do we have what we need to do so or do we have to look for something new?

S: One doesn't need very much in order to gain Insight, in the sense of Stream Entry. In the Mahaparinibbana sutta in the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha offers a 'Mirror of Dhamma' whereby you can tell if someone has gained Stream Entry: one looks to see if they have unshakeable faith in the Three Jewels and are perfect in morality. Unshakeable faith and perfection in morality! That's quite a tall order! We therefore know what the criteria are and we should be able to apply them at least to ourselves.

However, I think that a few people are over-concerned with Stream Entry and Insight. In some cases the concern becomes almost neurotic: it seems to indicate a lack of faith in the Dharma and certainly a lack of faith in what we are practising. One should just be concerned about practising the Dharma to the full extent of one's ability, then Stream Entry will look after itself. And the average Order member has more than sufficient resources in terms of teachings, practices, and supportive institutions to gain Insight.

Q: But don't you need detailed guidance from a teacher in order to gain Insight?

S: In reality, all you need is a few lines from the Dhammapada!

Q: But don't you need a detailed highway code of what exactly to do as you are meditating and don't you need the detailed personal attention of a teacher, such as you might get apparently in a Zen tradition and that sort of thing?

S: Some teachers may indeed offer that but you don't really need it. One must beware of what I've called 'pseudo-spiritual technism'. As for the Zen tradition, well what does one really get? You see a Roshi every now and then, you submit your answers to the koan, he says, 'No, it's not that. Go away!'

People are often lacking in self confidence. They want to be told, 'You're OK, you've got it right, you're not doing it wrong'. They want to know exactly what to do. Some people want mentoring, as distinct from Kalyana Mitrata in our usual sense, which of course everyone needs. We therefore should take that into account and give them encouragement and reassurance.

Of course, in order to make spiritual progress, you do need to know very basic things, like how to deal with hindrances and the importance of balanced effort. But you can quite easily get that knowledge within the FWBO. I have written about these matters at some length in many places and people need to refer to that, perhaps more than some do. If you study the teachings that you have got from me, if you apply them systematically and regularly over a period of time, don't worry, the results will come. And they do come: I have seen people grow and change even over comparatively short periods. That's been obvious from the very beginning of the movement.

Q: Is ours a real Buddhist Order?

S: Some people have ideas about authentic traditions and so on. I will at least say that we are more of a real Buddhist order than some others I could mention. We are of course a young order, but we may already have some Stream Entrants here and there who don't blow their own trumpets.

But people want reassurance, that is the problem, and often that is due to lack of confidence in themselves and what they are doing, and in the Dharma they are practising.

Q: Some people are wondering whether or not you have changed your views on the value and importance of living in single-sex communities and working in Team-based Right Livelihood.

S: No, I definitely have not and I feel the need to emphasise them more than ever. Team Based Right Livelihood was a development of the general principle of Right Livelihood, found in the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, and I continue to see it as essential. It's not enough for us to practise Right Livelihood as best we can out there in the world. The ideal work situation is Team-based Right Livelihood, where dana is generated and spiritual friendship can be developed more intensively.

I also still believe in the single sex communities and other single sex activities. The fact that they are less popular with some people than they used to be does not mean there has been any change in my thinking. In other words, they weren't just an adaptation to the circumstances of the '60s and '70s. They are of permanent value.

Q: Some are suggesting that the Zeitgeist is different now and people are less inclined to work in Team-based Right Livelihood Businesses or live in single-sex communities so therefore we should be changing our approach.

S: The question is, how would you change your approach with regard to Right Livelihood? And anyway, even if people don't want to work in

team-based businesses or live in single sex communities, that is irrelevant. After all, most people don't want to practice the Dharma. One goes on proclaiming what one thinks as good and right regardless of changes of fashion.

Of course, the Dharma still has something to say to those who cannot or chose not to live and work in these ways. If you are not working in a Team-based Right Livelihood business, you will need to earn your living somehow, and the principles of Right Livelihood still apply to you. Similarly, I strongly recommend single sex communities, but if people do not want to or cannot live in them, they still need to apply the Dharma as best they can to their situation and to try to make that situation as supportive as possible of their spiritual efforts. If some people want to set up family-based communities as an alternative, for instance, I've no objection to that, though I continue to think of the single sex community as the model.

It is worth stressing, however, that a single sex community will not automatically fulfil its potential simply by virtue of being single sex. It may have a lot more potential than living in a nuclear family, but that potential is not automatically going to be realised: that is dependent on the efforts of its members. It's not difficult for a single sex community to degenerate into mere shared accommodation, especially if you find that numbers are dwindling and rent needs to be met.

Q: What about the basic institutions of the Order and movement? There seems to be a drift away from the structures that we have: obviously, a smaller proportion of people are living in communities or working in Right Livelihood businesses, but also it seems that not so many Order members are giving much time to teaching the Dharma or helping at centres. In addition, it seems that many Order members are not in chapters and many chapters do not have Chapter Convenors. Fewer people attend regional and national Order weekends, and the proportion of Order members attending Conventions is diminishing. Do these institutions need rethinking?

S: They only need rethinking in the sense that some Order members should rethink their attitudes to them, if they have lost their sense of the significance of those institutions. If some Order members are not ensuring that they have truly supportive conditions for their spiritual practice, they are not going for refuge as effectively as they might be. It is the same if they are not actively working to spread the Dharma, especially through our centres. And it does seem that a smaller proportion of Order members are actively participating in the Order's institutions. If that tendency continues

the Order will simply become a kind of society or social club and all the benefits of the Order, both to oneself and to the world, will be lost.

I believe the problem is that we are affected by the wider social trend towards a private life, with less and less participation in a public world. This is especially strong in Britain. No doubt, some loss of inspiration and commitment also comes into it, and that loss will almost certainly be increased by withdrawal from the shared life of the Order. This must definitely be reversed if the Order is to survive. The solution lies with the individual Order member making more of an effort to participate in the life of the Order and movement.

Q: Isn't the Order less creative now than it used to be? Isn't there less possibility of creativity, especially since you are so much concerned about boundaries? In the early days we weren't bothered about boundaries, we were more concerned with principles, there was much more freedom.

S: I wouldn't agree with much of that. For a start, there is a misunderstanding about the nature of freedom. Freedom doesn't mean you are in a position to do anything you please. I think that's probably where the confusion lies. For practical purposes we need to agree upon limits, otherwise there couldn't be a Sangha for people to belong to. Boundaries, both at the entrance and the exit, are an inevitable part of setting up an Order, which after all is something distinct. All Order members know this, because they went to some trouble to cross the boundaries into the Order at their ordination.

In its early days, the Order certainly was very creative, in the sense that we had to work out for ourselves all the basic principles and create all the basic institutions. Later Order members are not in the same position. But even in those early days we were 'confined' by what the Buddha had done. He had discovered the Dharma once and for all, as far as this world period is concerned, and no one could therefore do what he had done. The Buddha in that sense was more creative, no one can match the creativity of the Buddha. Thus there is less creativity or originality now, because so much of the work has already been done and needs to be developed rather than originated.

The early Order members did what later Order members, by the very nature of the situation, cannot do, but they can do something similar, by going forth and setting up new centres, communities, and team-based Right Livelihood businesses. If they do not wish to do that and wish to experience that creativity of the early days, yet don't wish to be confined by the FWBO that was created all those years ago, let them go and set up their own order. I can assure them, it's no easy matter!

There is now within the movement every bit as much scope for Order members' creativity, in the sense of initiative and originality, even if it is of a different kind. They can go off to some place where the FWBO isn't known and they can pioneer there: there are many towns even in Britain where we don't have any activities, so there is plenty of scope for their creativity. But I suspect that there are many who don't want to do that. They don't want to leave their job, family, girl or boy friend. They hold themselves back very often, in so many ways. I wish more Order members would go and pioneer: why should dozens of Order members cluster around a single urban centre when they could be spreading the Dharma and the FWBO somewhere else? If the Order is less creative now than it was, perhaps that's because some people aren't as inspired and don't practice the Dharma as hard as most people did in the very early days.

Q: Why is there not more gratitude and appreciation in the Order for what those early Order members did, rather than feeling that they have no scope for their creativity now?

S: People are constantly expressing their gratitude to me, both in writing and in person, for my own work and for what they have gained from their Preceptors and their spiritual friends, their communities and chapters, and in fact from the whole movement.

Q: A lot of your responses have focused on your role in defining the boundaries, if you like to put it that way. After you, of course, you will still remain important in defining the boundaries through your teachings, but a key element is missing, which is your physical presence. For instance, now anyone who wants to regularise their position as regards other teachers can come and see you and sort it out. And if they see their own Preceptors, those Preceptors can clarify any point of principle that is not clear to them with you.

S: You've got quite a substantial body of literature to consult...

But there is something about the movement, the Order and even about me that is not easily definable. There is a touch of something that cannot be buttoned down, something that cannot in the end be defined. Even the desire to button it down or define it is a mistake – that was the mistake that the Theravada made in connection with its Vinaya. Everyone will need to take care of that rather mysterious, indefinable spirit that gives the movement life and energy.

Everyone must play their part in keeping the Order and movement alive, especially in terms of that indefinable element. But ultimately it's the Public Preceptors who are the principal key, inasmuch as they are the

keepers of the gate into the Order, and other Order members will need to cooperate with them.

Q: Do you still have confidence in the Public Preceptors, collectively and individually?

S: I have confidence enough!

Revering and Relying upon the Dharma

Sangharakshita's approach to Right View.

Dharmachari Subhuti

“What is our fundamental philosophical position?”, mused Sangharakshita during a meeting of senior members of the Triratna Order in the 1980's. I was struck by his reflective tone – and the fact that he gave no answer: this was work in progress.

Without interrogating the notion 'fundamental philosophical position' too closely, it broadly corresponds in this context to the Buddhist term 'samyag-dṛṣṭi' or 'Right View' – 'Perfect Vision' in Sangharakshita's translation. Over his many years of teaching, Sangharakshita has expounded Right View in many ways, using the terminology and perspectives of a wide range of historical Buddhist schools and translating key terms variously, borrowing from the philosophical, psychological, poetic, and even religious vocabulary of the West. He has also formed his own distinctive language for communicating the Buddha's view of life, in such phrases as the 'Higher Evolution' or the 'Cosmic Going for Refuge'. The remarkable richness and diversity of what he has said and written is certainly, besides its luminous clarity, one of the most attractive features of the Triratna Community, the movement he has founded, giving it a particularly broad appeal and deep scope. However, it also leaves potential problems. Consistency may indeed be a foolish hobgoblin, but inconsistency can lead to misunderstanding and confusion.

We need to consider the whole grand sweep of Sangharakshita's presentation carefully if we are to discern a fundamental philosophical position. But this is not an easy task. While carrying it out, there are two main points to be born in mind, because they account for some of the apparent inconsistency.

First, his exposition of one or other Buddhist tradition should not necessarily be taken for approval of it. He has often found himself elucidating teachings so that his disciples can appreciate the Buddhist

background from which they have sprung. In doing so, he has engaged his considerable powers of empathy with those points of view and has tried to understand them on their own terms, thereby helping us get inside them.¹ Indeed, I have heard him do the same for works of literature and even for the doctrines of other religions. However, his making intelligible an aspect of the Buddhist tradition, even revealing its spiritual efficacy, does not necessarily mean that he considers it useful in its own right or that it should become part of the Triratna Community's currency.²

Second, we must take into account Sangharakshita's own development as a practitioner and as a teacher. Throughout his life he has been deepening his understanding of the Dharma and clarifying his expression of it. Although there is striking continuity in his understanding from his earliest writings to the present day, there is nonetheless a discernible evolution over time: it is possible to recognise the gradual emergence of an integral core that is distinctive to him. Sangharakshita has himself described the unfolding of the core of that core in his *The History of My Going for Refuge*, and similar development can be seen elsewhere.

We must then always read his earlier teachings in the light of his later. This does not by any means require us to discard his earlier material – for instance, burning any book in which he uses terminology borrowed from the German Idealists, like 'The Absolute', which he now eschews. Nor yet does it require us to cut out the entire Mahayana, because he now finds some of its metaphysicising problematically reified, despite his earlier use of it. What it implies is that we should have a good understanding of his most recent perspective when we look at his earlier work and read or listen to it accordingly. And, of course, his disciples should take great care in how they themselves use that earlier material in their own practice. When they teach the Dharma they should ensure that the basic position is clear and, if they choose to refer to other, more ambiguous material, they should make it obvious that they are doing so for particular purposes.

Even when all this is taken into account, Sangharakshita's question of thirty or so years ago still requires an answer. What is the Triratna Community's fundamental philosophical position? Insofar as the movement is founded upon Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma, that requires us to know his fundamental philosophical position. What are we to make of his various ways of speaking about Right View, whether those derived from tradition or of his own coinage? I have been especially concerned that those of us who are his disciples hear something definitive from him about such problematic terms as 'The Absolute', 'The Unconditioned', 'The Transcendental', etc., as well as 'Cosmic Going for Refuge' etc. So in March this year I had a series of conversations with him in which we discussed his latest thinking about these matters.

I recorded our sessions, intending to transcribe and edit them, however Sangharakshita preferred that I should write them up in my own words, since the topic requires a greater precision than he can martial in a spoken exchange - the deterioration of his sight not permitting him to commit his thought to paper himself. This I have done in what follows. I have tried to expound what Sangharakshita said to me at that time, not only on the basis of what he then said but also what I have found elsewhere in his work that seems relevant, and I have expanded upon his thought in my own words. What I have written has been carefully checked by Sangharakshita and can be taken as accurately representing his thought – as accurately as is possible in another's words and style.

The Importance of Views

Before proceeding further, I want to make clear why this task is necessary. It is necessary because views matter. But, first, what are views? Essentially they are ways in which we organise and interpret the raw data of our experience. Our senses, outer and inner, deliver us an undifferentiated mass of impressions, which must be reduced to some manageable order if we are to live at all successfully. The first step in creating cosmos out of chaos is the labelling and categorising of our perceptions so that the world becomes an assemblage of recognisable elements: this is *saṃjñā*, 'interpretation' or 'recognition', in its most basic function. Evidently this primary ordering is in part instinctual: animals too are able to differentiate eatable and uneatable, threat and herd member, own territory and rival's land. However, the ability to apply words and concepts greatly extends the subtlety and range of *saṃjñā*.

Language also brings something more: *vitarka*, the capacity to think, even to reason, to whatever extent we may use it. We can stand back from experience and consider how the elements of what we perceive are related to each other – and above all we can think about ourselves in relation to them. The patterns we form by that thinking are our views. They may find expression in more or less clearly articulated theories and ideas, but most often they are not formulated in a conscious way at all and are simply unthought-out attitudes and assumptions that are carried in our mental processes without us being aware of them.

Views may be immediate theories about particular situations or they may extend to fundamental questions of the meaning and purpose of human existence and the nature of reality itself. Actually all self-conscious individuals who have not realised the Dharma directly for themselves carry implicit views about their own self-hood and about life itself, however dim, contradictory, and muddled their ideas may be.

Our views are, of course, not disinterested. They arise out of our affectively tinged experience and in support of the fundamental struggle to avoid what we disdain and to gain and perpetuate what we value – pain and pleasure being the most basic categories of evaluation. In part, views are analyses of the situation we find ourselves in: explaining why pain or pleasure have arisen. In part, they are strategies for acting from that situation: explaining how we may further what we value in future. Most often, according to the Buddha, they are overhasty generalisations from our experience.³ They appear to serve our best interests, but often in fact only bring us future suffering.

Having constructed views to deal with our experience to what we suppose is our best advantage, we then become attached to them. That is because they themselves are often strongly connected with feelings of pleasure or pain. We get a sense of relief or satisfaction when we have a view about things, because we have 'mastered' the situation in thought and now know what to do.

Views can, of course, be 'right' or 'wrong' – no doubt with various shades in between. To distinguish the one from the other, we need to consider three things: the accuracy and balance of the data, the values that are being served, and the outcome. Right View attends to the data as a whole: it gives *yoniso manasikara*, 'wise attention', taking in all the information, pleasant, painful and neutral and seeing it as it is in fullness and depth. It stays close to the essential experience, recognising it as sharing the characteristics of all things: impermanence, insubstantiality, and inability to give permanent satisfaction, but offering always a gateway to liberation. Right View serves the highest and greatest possible good: progress on the Path towards the ultimate liberation of all. Finally, views can be judged as Right when they result in actions that are beneficial to self and others in accordance with the precepts.

Wrong views build on selective or one-sided interpretations of experience, distorted information that is not seen in its roundness or depth. We pick certain characteristics of things and leave out others, choosing what pleases us – even though perversely that may sometimes be the unpleasant aspects of things or especially of people. Wrong views serve narrow, coarse, selfish ends and they result in suffering for the agent and for others.

According to the Buddha, there are two kinds of fundamental wrong view: eternalist and nihilist. Both arise from breaking up the undifferentiated flow of experience, with its appearance of things coming into being and passing away, and emphasising one aspect at the expense of another. Eternalism consists in emphasising the fact that things appear

to arise or come into being. We abstract that arising and generalise it into a view of ultimate, eternal realities. Nihilism is the result of abstracting from the fact that things appear to cease and building a theory of the ultimate vacuity of reality, its essential valuelessness and lack of meaning and purpose.⁴

Both have consequences in action. There are so many forms of each that it is not possible to reduce the results to as neat equations as is often done in expositions of the Dharma. However, eternalism may result in self-denial of a destructive kind and it leads especially to the denial of personal moral sensitivity and in inhuman acts that are justified as the commands of an eternal principle of some kind – various forms of theistic belief are the characteristic examples of eternalism. Nihilism very often leads to an absorption in a very narrow pursuit of pleasure and a carelessness about or denial of moral values – one could say that consumerism is a modern nihilistic construction.

Right View does not promote either attachment to the reified abstractions of eternalism or to the lack of value, order, and meaning of nihilism. Rather it brings us back to what can be clearly seen in experience, whether of what is happening to and in us at any particular moment or of what we know from those we have found to be wise.

It should by now be obvious that it does matter, and matter very much, what views we hold. Integrity and good intentions are not enough: an intelligent understanding that accords with the ways things truly are is essential. The ideas we have about life, the attitudes we have to our experience, all shape the way we act for good or for evil. The long experience of mankind amply demonstrates that ideas really do count: we can see, for example, the terrible inhumanity that flowed from views in the twentieth century, whether fascist, communist, or colonialist. Much of the danger in the world today stems from the confrontation in the Middle East between incompatible views: Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Socialist, Neo-Conservative, Liberal and so forth.

Of course, views have been the basis for much good in the world, too, and today we must hope and work for the triumph of humanitarian views of all kinds. Considering the enormous destructive potential of modern technology, one could say that the survival of the world today depends upon the widespread influence of more helpful views about the nature of this life, humanity's meaning and purpose, and the responsibility that one human being has to another – and to other beings too. Views matter because they shape our ethical lives; they also shape spiritual or religious life, in the broadest sense. Genuine spiritual growth is a possibility within life itself and can be witnessed among some followers of most religions –

and of no religion, especially within the fields of art and philosophy. The problem is that, in so many cases, religions distort human growth because of their way of understanding life – because of their views, especially of the eternalist variety. It is very significant that, in the Brahmajala-sutta, the Buddha's classic statement on the subject, a majority of the sixty-four wrong views enumerated are misinterpretations of visionary and meditative experience: views sidetrack higher experience and prevent it from leading to liberation.⁵

What is distinctive about Buddhism is its definitive clarity about the Path and the goal to which it is directed. The Buddha saw very clearly indeed the danger of views and the necessity of maintaining a sharp awareness of the way we think and talk about our lives, our efforts on the path, and especially our understanding of the true nature of things. The Pali texts show him to be ever alert for ideas that are harmful, or at least not helpful, whether to ethical life or the attainment of liberation. It is very striking that the Brahmajala-sutta is the first sutta of the first nikaya of the first Pitaka of the Tipitaka. Wrong views lead to a distortion of human experience and, at best, prevent genuine spiritual aspiration achieving its full flowering, at worst they lead to all the evils of which human beings are capable.

Until we have seen things directly as they are, we rely upon Right Views for our practice of the Dharma. This is why study is such an important aspect of Dharma practice. We need to clear our minds of the wrong views, whether eternalist or nihilist in any of their many forms and sub-species, that make up so much of our thought and attitudes. This requires us to do quite a bit of self-examination, especially through study and discussion of the Dharma with those clearer than ourselves.⁶ At the same time, we must acquire Right Views, the set of ideas about things that direct us back to how they really are and teach us first to live in harmony with others and ourselves, through ethics and meditation, and then, through Wisdom, to gain liberation from suffering.

The Buddha's 'metaphysical reticence'

The Buddha rigorously resisted all wrong views, seeing them as a 'thicket, a jungle, a tangle' in which one can easily get lost. He taught Right View as the first limb of his most basic presentation of the Path: the Noble Eightfold Path. However he was not teaching philosophy, despite what Sangharakshita says of him in his early paper *Philosophy and Religion in Original and Developed Buddhism* - at least not speculative philosophy: if he could be described as a philosopher at all, it would be as an empirical one. He was not concerned to provide a comprehensive,

rationally derived account of reality or an explanation of how and why it worked. He considered that to be a distraction from the real task. In some places, he speaks of having no view, in the sense of not holding onto a preconceived philosophical position.⁷ He saw the way things are directly by his Wisdom and did not require any position from which to evaluate them. He was a thinker, however, reflecting deeply on his own experience of suffering and pointing out what it was necessary for us to know in order to get free from it.

The Buddha's thought represented a complete break from that of his contemporaries and those who preceded him in India. His teaching was quite foreign to the general Indian mentality and mode of expression, both before and after his time. Of course, he had to address some of the principal concerns of his times and to express himself in a common stock of terminology. But he rejected the speculative and metaphysical trends common in that age. He famously refused to answer four metaphysical problems posed by the wanderer Vacchagotta, dismissing them as unprofitable for gaining liberation from suffering.⁸

The Buddha scrupulously avoided all metaphysical abstraction in his presentation of the Dharma – this has been referred to as his 'metaphysical reticence'. Where he has been interpreted as abstracting (e.g. the 'unborn' of the Ariyapariyesana-sutta⁹), it is plain that he is being poetic and should not be taken philosophically. However, it did not take long for the Indian tendency to highly abstract thought to be brought to bear on his teaching. The Dharma theory of the Abhidharma was the first move and later Mahayana thinkers went far further, culminating in the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, with all its rich variety of forms and interpretations, some of them very complex indeed.

Those who developed such theoretical approaches may have been, in their own context and experience, making good sense of the teachings and practices they inherited to deal with problems they faced, especially those posed by Brahminical challengers; they may have been fully faithful to the spirit of the Dharma. It is possible, as Sangharakshita himself has done, to make very good and inspiring spiritual sense of some of these metaphysical constructions. However, they betray the Buddha's fundamental method – and one might say his method was itself a principal aspect of his teaching: the way the Buddha talked was as significant as what he said. This implies a fourth criterion for Right View, besides what is mentioned above: the accuracy and balance of the data, the values that are being served, and the ethical outcome. We must also consider the effect of the language we use: does it communicate either an eternalist or nihilist impression? Sangharakshita believes that quite a lot of terms used throughout the Buddhist tradition fail this test.

Sangharakshita acknowledges that he himself has employed a number of apparently metaphysical terms in his own presentations: 'The Absolute' being the most egregious example.¹⁰ The problem is that inevitably one hears or reads terms like 'The Absolute', 'The Unconditioned', 'The Transcendental', 'The Non-dual', 'Buddha Nature', especially when capitalised, as referring to some reified metaphysical entity, real, but existing somehow apart from what can be experienced. They easily lead into views, species of eternalism, and those views will then provide the basis for action, which will easily become unskilful, since they are not in tune with the ways things truly are. Such quasi-philosophical or metaphysical terminology is to be avoided, especially in our general teaching. It should only be used where it is genuinely helpful and one can make very clear indeed that one is speaking in an entirely poetic, metaphorical, or imaginative sense – which is not easy to be sure of one's hearers having caught, however luminous one's own understanding.

In general, Sangharakshita says, the more abstract the mode of expression the less authentic it is in expressing the Buddha's teaching, and the more concrete the more authentic. If we have to engage much mental gymnastics to make it clear that such abstractions do not refer to ontological realities, our suspicions should be aroused and we should be very wary of using them. When we read or hear terms of this kind in Sangharakshita's own work, we need to be aware of what he is intending: an imaginative or poetic evocation of the goal of the Dharma life. And perhaps we should be very cautious about imitating him in this particular way. We should stray no further into speculation than is strictly necessary for real practice of the Dharma. This was the Buddha's own direct example to us.

The danger of nihilism

The danger so far mentioned is at the eternalist end of the wrong-view spectrum. However, nihilism is as much of a danger – and perhaps a worse one in our times. How do we convey a sense of deeper meaning and purpose to life, of something that goes beyond our present range, without of course 'something' seeming to refer to a supra-experiential reality? How do we keep before us a 'transcendental object', in Sangharakshita's perhaps dangerous phrase: a higher goal of our spiritual efforts? It is essential for us to conceive and imagine such a goal, for the Dharma life is lived to go beyond what we now are. If we do not have that image before us, we cannot direct our energies to practising the Dharma. In our eagerness to avoid eternalism, we must beware of falling into nihilism. But how are we to avoid it? What then is it to which we are going beyond what we now are? How are we to talk about that?

There is not only the problem of where we are going: how are we going to get there? The Dharma life takes us beyond our narrow self-identity and its egoistically based motivations. What then is it that takes over from our normal drives, however benign? Unless one has already some abiding experience of that goal and that supra-selfish motivation, one needs a way of keeping them in mind, allowing them a convincing and inspiring presence in one's life, and aligning one's actions with them. One needs to be able to refer to and have confidence in goal and supra-selfish motive force so they can shape one's choices in accordance with the Dharma – one needs increasingly to sense a direction towards which one is drawn and a deeper energy that carries one to it. But how can one refer to these without suggesting a something metaphysical that truly exists?

Sangharakshita's experience of the goal and of Dharmic motivation

For Sangharakshita himself this never seems to have been a problem. From his first contact with it, the Dharma made a direct and vivid impact upon him and within him. Reading the Diamond Sutra at the age of 16, he experienced 'something ineffable' that he 'at once joyfully embraced with an unqualified acceptance and assent'. This released in him a fountain of joyous energy and gave him a sense of unbounded freedom. From then on, he was drawn forward, never doubting the direction he was taking. Increasingly he experienced a motivation arising within him that transcended himself: from the Bodhisattva Ideal, from his visualisation of Tara, Manjusri and other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

He had a particularly powerful experience of this supra-personal motivation after he arrived in Nagpur on 6th December 1956 to learn of Dr Ambedkar's death. He experienced himself responding entirely spontaneously to the crisis faced by the new Buddhists, bereft of their revered leader - responding with deep inspiration and great effectiveness, as if something from far beyond him was working through him. He says that, while he was giving lecture after lecture over a number of days without rest, it didn't feel as if it was him speaking. Sometimes he would not know what he was saying, 'The words would just come out of my mouth, and I would hear them almost as if I was listening to another person; they were not preceded by thought'.

Later, when he was lecturing in Britain, he quite often felt that at a certain point in the talk something took over that was more than him. In a similar vein, he later speaks of the Triratna Order having been founded through him, rather than him founding the Order. Looking back and reflecting on his life as a whole it does seem to him that he has been driven by a wind from far beyond himself.

Sangharakshita's fundamental 'philosophical' perspective

These experiences have helped Sangharakshita make sense of the Buddha's teaching and have fuelled his contemplation of it, especially in the form of reflections on Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, the 'spiral path', the nature of Stream Entry and the bodhicitta, leading on to ideas about the Lower and Higher Evolution. He has arrived thereby at his own particular presentation of Right View.

For him, as for the Buddha, the fundamental expression of Right View is *pratitya-samutpada*, which is in a sense no view at all¹¹: it is not a theory about things but a description of what we actually can see and know about all elements of our experience. It is the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. It avoids eternalism because all is dependently arising and therefore impermanent; it avoids nihilism because it contains the possibility of a path of selftranscendence.

In its classic statement, the Buddha's fundamental insight points out that any aspect of experience we choose to examine can be seen to arise in dependence on conditions and, those conditions ceasing, itself to cease. Much follows from this. Most notably, conditionality entails, and is entailed by, the three *lakṣaṇas*: what is conditioned cannot be permanent, cannot have substantial existence, and cannot offer abiding satisfaction. But conditionality implies also a dynamic interrelationship of all things, inner and outer. There is not merely a coincidental procession of otherwise independent, impermanent, insubstantial events. There is a connection between one event and what follows it. One set of events conditions another. From this set of events, just that set of events must emerge.

The fact of conditionality requires no theory about the precise mechanism whereby conditions and conditioned are related. It is simply what we can observe happening all around us and within us: it is just the way things really are. There is regularity or order to the chain of events. All is ordered or regulated, in the sense that, broadly speaking, from the same conditions the same effects will emerge.

Pratitya-samutpada is, from this point of view, the general principle of ordered relationship between conditions and their effects. That principle is expressed in a vast, perhaps infinite, number of possible laws that govern the relationship between particular conditions and what they condition – although the metaphor of 'law' and 'government' here certainly implies no external agency or law maker. For instance, the 'law of gravity' simply describes a predictable regularity in the relationship between any possible larger and smaller body. It is this ordered nature of things that enables us

to function in relation to them – if there was no such order, life would not be possible.

Although the fact of pratitya-samutpada is fundamental to our survival in the most basic sense, its importance for Dharma life is more specific. Our ability to find liberation from suffering depends upon pratitya-samutpada, not merely in that fully understanding the principle is liberation, but that liberation is possible because there are regularities or laws within the overall pattern of pratitya-samutpada that make it so. Once we have understood and are fully convinced about the nature of reality as pratitya-samutpada, we align ourselves with those regularities or laws that lead us to liberation. Liberation too arises in dependence on conditions - there are regularities that govern spiritual growth and fulfilment.

The Five Niyamas

To understand this further, we need to look at the variety of conditioned relationship. In the suttas the Buddha refers to a range of different kinds, but these are never clearly classified. That task was undertaken later and was recorded by Buddhaghosa in his commentaries on the Tipitaka.¹² Buddhaghosa set out five niyamas under which all conditioned relationships can be grouped. Niyama means 'restraint', 'limitation', or 'necessity' and, in this context, refers to categories of necessary relationship within the principle of conditionality – the five different classes or orders of regularities by which conditioned is bound to conditions.

This classification has had a major influence on Sangharakshita's understanding and presentation of pratitya-samutpada, although he has given it his own interpretation, in certain respects different from that found in the commentaries and especially of modern understandings of them.¹³ In his exposition of the niyamas, he uses modern concepts not found in ancient India to expound the five categories and he gives some of them rather different meanings from what is found in the sources. He probably does this on the basis of Mrs Rhys Davids' interpretation. It is important to acknowledge that what we are left with is a teaching that is sufficiently different to be regarded in some respects as new, although based on the essential principle, found in Buddhaghosa, that conditionality as a whole comprises different 'orders'. Sangharakshita's analysis is, however, not at all inconsistent with the teaching of the Buddha as found in the Suttas – and, it must be said, what appears to be the import of the commentaries themselves.

Although much of the ground is quite familiar, it is worth recounting the teaching as a whole as Sangharakshita understands it, so that its full significance as an exposition of what is the middle way between eternalism and nihilism is made plain. It is also worth spelling out so that it can be seen in the context of Sangharakshita's overall presentation of the Dharma.

Pratitya-samutpada means that there are discernible patterns of regularity between conditions and what they condition. These patterns of regularity can be grouped into five categories – the five niyamas: utu, bija, mano, kamma, and dhamma.

Utu-niyama is the sum total of the regularities found in physical inorganic matter – the subject matter of the sciences of physics and chemistry – the conditions that govern the Mineral Kingdom. It includes the law of gravity, the laws of thermodynamics, the laws governing chemical reactions, electricity, the structure of atoms, etc.

Bija-niyama is made up of all the conditioned relationships that pertain to living organisms – the Vegetable or Plant Kingdom, the subject matter of biology, botany, and physiology. Examples of bija niyama conditionality are photosynthesis, genetic inheritance, the circulation of the blood.

Mano-niyama is the sum of regularities that order the Animal Kingdom, made up of all organisms that have sensory perception, studied by zoology and much of behavioural science. Here are found the processes of perception, reflexes and stimulus-response reactions, and instincts. Included may be very complex and intelligent responses, such as remarkable migratory instincts and survival strategies of apparently great cunning.

These three niyamas all operate in us: regularities of conditioned relationships under these three headings govern our bodies and our sensory and instinctual intelligence. It is within these niyamas that what Sangharakshita calls the 'Lower Evolution' takes place. The remaining two niyamas are what make the 'Higher Evolution' possible.

Kamma-niyama conditionality comes into play once intelligence becomes self-reflexive, capable of forming an idea of self as a centre of action and experience. It consists of those regularities that are found in the relationship between the self-conscious agent and the effects of his or her actions, whether of body, speech, or mind. The effects that emerge under this niyama are of two kinds: external and internal. While it is more difficult to be certain whether or not something that happens to one is the result of one's past actions under the kammaniyama, it is relatively easy to

observe the way our actions reshape the mind as it re-arises from moment to moment in this life – if not the way it re-arises from life to life¹⁴.

Kamma-niyama is the arena of ethics. Actions that are based upon skilful or helpful states of mind broadly tend to bring beneficial effects in the world, pleasant feedback from one's surroundings, and a greater degree of inner satisfaction and fulfilment and a deeper and enriched experience. Of course, unhelpful actions have the opposite effect, in accordance with the karmic order of conditionality. Ethics consists in according one's actions with the way things are. Ethics is natural: what makes an action ethical or unethical is inherent in the nature of things. Reality is inherently ethical.

The dhamma-niyama is presented in the source commentaries as accounting for such matters as why a 'world-earthquake' takes place at each of the major stages in any Buddha's career. More recent Theravadin discussions seem to understand it as the fundamental principle of conditionality itself, inclusive of the others or as a sort of miscellaneous category to take care of whatever doesn't fit elsewhere¹⁵ Sangharakshita however reads much more specific meaning into it. The dhamma-niyama comprises those conditioned processes by means of which Buddhas arise. These processes are represented especially by the sequence of 'positive' factors that arise at Stream Entry. It is, one might say, the stream that one enters.

Buddhahood is not a random event, nor is it given: it is gained by establishing a sequence of conditions, each succeeding one arising out of the preceding in accordance with pratityasamutpada. One attains Bodhi by exploiting regularities inherent in reality: the capacity for Enlightenment is part of the way things are.

The cyclic and progressive directions within conditionality

The niyamas categorise all possible regularities of conditioned relationship and arrange them in a hierarchy of the degrees of consciousness that they support, from inorganic nonconsciousness through to the fully Enlightened mind – from those under utu-niyama to those under dhamma-niyama. However, each is not a discrete system, but is interrelated with the others in many complex ways. Most significantly, processes within one niyama may give rise to processes within another. Movement is possible from a lower to a higher – and indeed from a higher to a lower. We can thus distinguish two trends within pratitya-samutpada as a whole. There are those processes that remain on one level, moving in a constantly renewed cycle: as seen in the cycle of birth and death of any animal species or the formation and wearing away of

mountains. And there are those processes that move from one niyama to the next: whether upwards, as when living organisms emerge from a warm soup of amino acids (bija-niyama processes emerging from those of utu-niyama); or downwards, as when a plant species dies out (bija-niyama merging back into utu-niyama ones). Sangharakshita speaks of these horizontal and vertical directions within conditionality as a whole as cyclic and progressive (the possibility of progress taken as implying the possibility of regress).

The progressive trend within conditionality has two stages. At first, progression is blind – the organism does not consciously direct its own emergence in more complex and conscious forms. However, once self-awareness arises, bringing the kamma-niyama into play, deliberate effort must be made if there is to be further progress. This second, conscious stage within the progressive trend Sangharakshita describes as the growth of the creative mind through spiral conditionality.

The emergence of kamma-niyama conditionality, then, marks the transition to conscious development. Progress under the kamma-niyama requires the conscious subordination to ethical awareness of instincts belonging to the mano-niyama. If this does not happen then self-consciousness becomes side-tracked or degenerates, in accordance with the 'reactive' sequence of conditionality that is described in the twelve 'cyclic' nidanas. In terms of the traditional schema, this means wandering in the dugati, the four 'realms of misery' found in the Tibetan Wheel of Life: hell, pretaloka, animal realm, and world of the asuras; all of which represent distorted forms of self-consciousness – varieties of evolutionary cul-de-sac.

If ethical awareness does predominate, directing actions of body, speech, and mind in skilful ways, then consciousness emerges in more and more subtle and refined forms, increasingly expanded beyond a narrow self-reference. To complete the correspondence with the six realms schema: one then progresses through the sugati - the human and god realms.

The progressive possibility within the kamma-niyama consists in the sequence of steps leading up to Stream Entry, variously described in tradition. In the trisiksa, it is sila and samadhi; in the chain of twelve positive nidanas, it is the steps from sraddha up to samadhi. As consciousness emerges in more and more sensitive and pure forms, it becomes less and less self-referenced and it is increasingly attuned to the way things truly are. Gradually the tendency to egoistic clinging weakens enough for a new process to come into play: progress in accordance with the dhamma-niyama, beginning with the arising of prajña or

yathabhutajñānadarsana, at Stream Entry, and continuing on to Buddhahood.

This dhamma-niyama process develops naturally in accordance with its own inner dynamic, each stage emerging by inherent momentum at a higher level out of the one that precedes it and it is now irreversible. In the case of the four lower niyamas, all directions are possible: there may be a cycle of conditions or else conditions under the next niyama may emerge – or there may be a degeneration, in which the higher processes disappear. Under the dhammaniyama, there is only progression from higher state to higher still – the dhamma-niyama is pure progression.

The sequence of conditioned arisings, categorised under the dhamma-niyama, transcends self-consciousness, just as self-consciousness transcends instinctual consciousness, and develops within the individual independent of egoistic volition, spontaneously unfolding in more and more rich and satisfying forms. It is now the chief motive force of the one in whom it flowers, increasingly replacing the old self-referent willing, however refined. There is still a motivation, but it does not come from the individual will and it does not merely serve the interests of that individual. Considered from this point of view, it is the bodhicitta, a suprapersonal, altruistic motivating force – which is why Sangharakshita translates bodhicitta as the 'Will to Enlightenment', drawing out this aspect of its character. It is felt as a will from beyond one's own will, that carries one onward and upward, at this stage, without any personal effort. One's choice, under what remains of kamma-niyama, is to align oneself with it, to cooperate with it.

The niyamas and evolution, lower and higher

The progressive trend in conditionality runs through all the niyamas. When the appropriate conditions arise within each niyama, processes under the next niyama emerge. Physical and chemical processes of the utu-niyama provide the basis for the emergence of bija-niyama processes: living organisms are made up of and emerge from physical and chemical processes. Sense awareness and instinct, operating under the mano-niyama, emerge when the organic processes of the bija-niyama provide the necessary conditions. Sensory awareness and intelligence are the basis from which self-consciousness emerges and the kamma-niyama comes into effect. Conscious ethical growth, in accordance with the kamma-niyama, provides the conditions for the emergence of the self-transcending processes of the dhamma-niyama.

Sangharakshita sees this progression as a continuous sweep, which he connects with the idea of evolution. However, a caution is required here.

Sangharakshita's usage does not imply any particular theory of evolution, far less any kind of materialist epiphenomenalism: the doctrine that consciousness is simply a bi-product of physiological processes. That, of course, is a view, and a nihilist one at that. We are rescued from views by the Buddha's Right View of *pratitya-samutpada*, which avoids all theorising about the processes around us and in us. It merely describes what we can observe: regularities that enable us to say, 'In dependence on this, that arises', without begging any question as to why or how.

This theoretical agnosticism – an example of the Buddha's 'metaphysical reticence' – applies as much to what Sangharakshita calls the progressive or spiral order of conditionality as to the merely cyclical or reactive. The emergence of more complex and sensitive processes out of simpler ones, leading to the arising of the self-conscious individual and then to the arising of higher states of consciousness, is one that can be observed in the evidence all around us, if we include the reports of 'the wise'. Why it happens or what drives it is not a question the Buddhist needs to answer. Indeed, an answer would almost certainly not be profitable in terms of the leading of the Dharma life, and would very likely involve mistaken views about things that would hamper or block one's progress on the Path.¹⁶ All we are required to say is that we can observe, directly and by reliable report, regularities in the world around us and within us that do enable a progression from simpler to more complex and sensitive organisms and onward to higher human states, if not further.

Sangharakshita, then, connects the progressive trend in conditionality with the idea of evolution but he does not consider that equation as indispensable to his particular presentation of the Dharma, especially since he is well aware that some people find it off-putting. He makes the connection to take advantage of an idea that is familiar to many people already, giving them a broad image of development, but also to help make more sense of spiritual life by putting it in a wider context. If we can see the progressive trend at work throughout nature, we can recognise the continuity of what we are ourselves attempting to do as Buddhists with what is happening in the life all around us. The process of human development is a natural one.

With that caution firmly in mind, let us see how Sangharakshita connects the idea of evolution with the progressive trend in conditionality and with the *niyamas*. He speaks of an evolution of consciousness, with four phases:

First, a phase of blind evolution of sense or instinctual consciousness by species, which he calls the Lower Evolution, from *utu-niyama* to the emergence of self-awareness and therefore of the *kamma-niyama*;

Second, a phase of voluntary growth in self or moral consciousness under the kammaniyama, which constitutes the Higher Evolution of the individual in its lower phase, including all the stages from the emergence of reflexive consciousness to the first arising of prajña at Stream Entry; Third, a phase of the development of transcendental consciousness, unfolding spontaneously independent of individual volition once the stream has been entered under dhamma-niyama processes – the Higher Evolution in its higher phase; Fourth, a phase in which Enlightened consciousness flowers more and more richly. Here the dhamma-niyama processes unfold completely beyond the other niyamas. While a Buddha is alive and has a body, the three lower niyamas still operate - however the kamma-niyama has no relevance here, since there is not even a trace of self-attachment. Once Paranirvana is attained at death, there is only dhamma-niyama and we have no categories by which to describe what 'happens' – and this was one of Vacchagotta's questions that the Buddha said could not be answered by any of the categories of our thought. Here we enter a mystery.

Cosmic Going for Refuge

This progressive sweep clearly has a different character in each phase, as each is dominated by a different order of conditionality. However, there is a common element all the way through: there is an upward momentum, lifting on to the next level. We have most direct understanding of that momentum as we experience it within ourselves – in the second phase, that of voluntary growth. We feel a definite inner urge to go beyond ourselves as we now are to something more: there is a combination of disillusionment (samskara-dukkha) with our present experience, a sense of being drawn towards something further (saddha), and a commitment to move towards the highest goal we can see. This all finds expression in the Buddhist context in the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

In the third phase, that of transcendental development beyond Stream-entry, that momentum no longer depends upon our conscious effort: it is experienced as a current carrying one along or a will beyond one's own, guiding one's actions – in its altruistic form, the 'Will to Enlightenment', the bodhicitta.

The motivating force operating in the fourth phase defies description, but leads to conduct that is unfailingly beneficial. Presumably, the Jina Amoghasiddhi embodies the 'motivation' of the Enlightened mind: he embodies the transcendental counterpart of the skandha of samskara or volition, he is the head of the Karma family, his Wisdom is the Action

Accomplishing, and his name means 'unobstructed success'. Sangharakshita says in his seminar on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, '...the action of Amoghasiddhi represents something subtle and even esoteric. It's not just action in the ordinary, crude, obvious sense. ... it works in "unknown ways".' This is perhaps the nearest we can get to the momentum here: an unfailing creative force that moves mysteriously to accomplish the benefit of all.

But what of the first phase? What is the momentum that carries the evolving organism on to the next level? Something analogous to volition is observable in living organisms: a drive or urge of an instinctive kind, whether for survival or reproduction, is the precursor of what emerges in us as our own will. Extended far enough in favourable enough conditions, that instinctive urge or drive transcends itself, even one might say fulfils itself, in selfconsciousness volition.

At lower levels still, biological, chemical, and physical processes cannot be characterised even as drives or urges in anything but the most poetic sense, but they still have a momentum that, given the appropriate circumstances, leads to the arising of an organism with sense-intelligence. It is interesting to note that the translation of the Atthasalini, one of the texts that refer to the niyamas, has 'caloric order' for utu-niyama and this seems to be the usual understanding of it. In Abhidharma theory, heat is the dhatu or element that brings about change and transformation. This points to the inherent momentum even in physical and primitive organic matter. We thus have a dynamic principle that is represented by 'heat' at the most basic levels, by instinctive desire at the animal level, by will at the level of the human being, and by bodhicitta at the level of the Stream-entrant.

Looking at things in this way brings to mind Schopenhauer's notion of Wille, which Sangharakshita acknowledges may have influenced his own thinking. Could the dhammaniyama itself be the progressive momentum, driving the whole evolutionary process, finding its unstoppable expression at Stream Entry and finally unfettered at Buddhahood? There are ways of reading the source commentaries that could support this. However, engaging in this, so tantalising, area we stray dangerously close to a theory of evolution – in other words, to a view. Pratitya-samutpada relieves us from that danger by enabling us simply to state what we may observe: in dependence on this level, that arises.¹⁷

Sangharakshita sees the progression as a continuous momentum, manifesting on higher and higher levels, finding its full expression once the dhamma-niyama comes into play. He thus dares to speak poetically of a 'Cosmic Going for Refuge', a phrase very much open to

misinterpretation, being sometimes taken, whether in mistaken excitement or equally mistaken dismay, to imply somehow a conscious intention on the part of the Cosmos. In his understanding, it refers simply to a momentum that can be seen at every level of evolution, from the merest atom to the full flowering of Bodhi. At every level the possibility exists of moving to a higher – there is the possibility of 'self-transcendence', to use terminology found elsewhere in Sangharakshita's work. It is this always possible upward momentum that is the Cosmic Going for Refuge, no more and no less.

If this terminology, and the allied language of Evolution, Lower and Higher, has any value at all, it is that it brings out the continuity of this progressive trend, and therefore the continuity of our own efforts upon the Path with processes that occur naturally all around us, as well as with the forces that move within the Buddha's own mind. What one feels as an urge within oneself is not merely accidental. It is a trend, even a momentum, within things that now emerges in one's own consciousness. The universe cooperates with you in your efforts to follow the Path – or, rather, your own conscious efforts cooperate with the evolutionary trend in the universe.

Understanding this brings an attitude essential to following the Path: a humble and confident openness to processes that are far larger than one's own small selfhood. This disposition is indispensable - even if one does not take to the terminology of evolution or finds the phrase 'Cosmic Going for Refuge' too problematic.

Faith in the progressive trend

Whether in these terms or not, the recognition of the progressive trend within pratityasamutpada is essential to leading the Dharma life. We need to be confident that it is possible to go beyond our present level of consciousness and to realise fully that it can only be done by creating the conditions out of which new levels emerge. Without that confidence and understanding, we will not apply ourselves to assembling the necessary conditions.

First, we need to be convinced that there is a kamma-niyama, a karmic order of conditionality. Only when we have that faith will we make an effort to create the conditions for our further growth. We will practise sila, acting in ways that are helpful to ourselves and others, in accordance with the Precepts; we will develop wholesome states of mind, through samadhi; and we will gain as clear an understanding of the Dhamma as we can, through cultivating sruta-, cinta-, and bhavana-maya-prajña. These

efforts will bring higher and richer states of consciousness into being and will bring us into increasing harmony with the way things are.

Then, we need to have faith that there is a dhamma-niyama, a dharmic order of conditionality. Only then will we be confident that we can let go of our selfhood and give up our individual volition. We will systematically disabuse ourselves of the illusion of a fixed self and will deliberately let go of our clinging onto it, through the practice of prajña or vipasyana meditation. This will create the conditions in dependence on which the spontaneous stream may emerge within us, carrying us on to Buddhahood.

This is the fundamental faith we need in order to lead a Dharma life: a belief in the karmic and dharmic orders of conditionality. There is no need for us to believe in metaphysical realities or agencies outside experience – there is no need for eternalism. But that lack of any eternal being or force need not imply a nihilistic sense that there is no meaning or order or direction to life. The faith we need for Dharma life arises out of what we can establish through clear logical analysis and validate at every moment in our experience: everything arises in dependence on conditions. Within that conditioned arising is a progressive possibility: this again we can verify in our observation of nature, as regards the lower niyamas. As regards the kamma-niyama, we can recognise its force in our own lives: we can feel within us the power of our own urge to develop and can witness how skilful action brings a progressive change in our own consciousness. If we do not have our own direct experience of the dhamma-niyama, we can refer to our knowledge of the Buddha and his enlightened disciples down the ages, for the Buddha exemplifies, even embodies, the dharmic order of conditionality. Reading about the Buddha and other great heroes of the Dharma, studying their words, insofar as we can, strengthens our conviction that there is a dhamma-niyama that we can align ourselves with, so that we may attain freedom from suffering.

The niyamas and the system of meditation

If we have that faith in the progressive trend within reality, especially in the form of the kamma- and dhamma-niyamas, then we will be able to practise the Dharma wholeheartedly. We will align ourselves with the progressive trend by assembling the conditions that will move us on from level to level. This is what we may methodically do by following

Sangharakshita's System of Meditation, with its four progressive stages and fifth 'stageless' stage, which is the framework for the Triratna Community's approach to meditation. The System works with all five niyamas, bringing us into a relationship with each of them that will allow

the progressive or spiral kind of conditionality to unfold through us. Although it is termed the System of Meditation, it is really much more than that and encompasses the stages we must go through in all aspects of our lives.

The Stage of Integration grounds us in our awareness of *utu-*, *bija-*, and *mano-niyamas* as we directly encounter them. It begins with basic mindfulness of the body, through *kayanupasyana* and *vedananupasyana*. Without that mindfulness of bodily sensations and feelings, consciousness will be distorted and unreal, to some extent, and therefore unable to evolve in a balanced way. Integration here includes such issues as taking proper care of one's body, as the vehicle of one's further evolution. If one does not look after the health of one's body, a bundle of conditioned arisings under the first three orders of conditionality, it will cause many hindrances to one's practice of the Dharma.

Integrating *mano-niyama* energies is even more demanding than mindfulness of the body. The instincts and conditionings that form our basic mental make-up are more elusive and can be very complex. Yet, if one does not know, to some extent, one's own particular nature, the *mano-niyama* conditions as they manifest in oneself, one's efforts will constantly be undermined. We need to be aware of the instinctual demands of our animal nature, if it is not to dominate us, in one way or another. We need to recognise the influence upon of us of our own family and cultural conditioning in shaping our responses under *mano-niyama*. Again, we need to have some understanding of our particular character type, our own mental 'physique', which we have quite independent of our own choices. Coming to terms with one's own nature and conditioning in this sense is a major part of early spiritual life. All of this is value neutral – no blame attaches to us for our basic physique, our particular character shape, or our background and childhood experience. However, to be karmically responsible, we need broadly to understand ourselves from these points of view, so that we can act in ways that are skilful, taking into account who we actually are. All this is the task of the Stage of Integration.

The Stage of Positive Emotion works especially with the *kamma-niyama*. This means trying to be ethical, so that one's actions, guided by the Precepts, are more and more helpful to oneself and to others. It also means addressing underlying motivations by deliberately cultivating helpful intentions – skilful mental states – through the practice of meditation. Included also is genuine communication and friendship, especially in the context of Sangha. These efforts of *sila* and *samadhi* will gradually bear fruit under the law of Karma. One will experience deeper and richer states of consciousness emerging – not merely at the time of meditation. One will have a more abiding sense of satisfaction and self-

confidence, one will feel a deeper harmony with others and a stronger sympathy, one will have a more subtle aesthetic sensibility, one will dwell more frequently in dhyana. If that is not our experience it is because we have not set up the conditions for it, through integration and positive emotion – we have not yet worked sufficiently with the lower niyamas and with the kamma-niyama.

The kamma-niyama comes into play when self-consciousness arises. Working with the progressive possibilities in the kamma-niyama requires us to have a sense of ourselves as responsible ethical agents. We must be capable of standing apart from the flow of our experience and identifying a self that owns the experience and that is capable of choosing to act skilfully rather than unskilfully. This self-reflexiveness is initially quite crude, involving a rather rigid sense of ourselves as something real and separate. One of the consequences of development under the kamma-niyama, as we practise the Stage of Positive Emotion, is that the sense of self becomes more flexible and interpenetrates more sympathetically with the world around us. However, that self-sense still rests upon a deep quasi-instinctual illusion that must be transcended. Although the idea of self is essential if one is to work with the progressive trend in the kamma-niyama, it is simply an idea, limited and ultimately limiting. We must give it up, so that a new order of conditionality may take over.

The dhamma-niyama functions beyond our willing, so we must renounce the illusion of an independent self if it is to manifest within us. This is the function of the Stage of Spiritual Death. Through practices like the Contemplation of the Six Elements, we deliberately see through and give up our self-identity.¹⁸ If we have created a sufficiently refined and sensitive consciousness through developing conditions under the kamma-niyama, then this renunciation of fixed self-identity creates the space within which the dhamma-niyama may function spontaneously through us.

The Stage of Spiritual Rebirth trains us to 'revere and rely upon' the dhamma-niyama completely, resting in it as what unfolds within us when we give up our self-attachment. It means allowing a new supra-personal motive force to operate through us, now that we have relinquished self-referent willing. The most effective way of practising here is to enter the world of archetypal imagination, especially through the visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We feed our illumined imaginations with archetypal figures that embody the dhamma-niyama and thereby train in submitting ourselves more and more willingly to the movement inherent within reality that leads on to Buddhahood and beyond.

The Stage of No Practice, in which we 'just sit', is undertaken in parallel with each stage of the System of Meditation. At each stage it has a somewhat different significance, but one could speak of it as allowing the evolutionary trend to unfold naturally within one, without any effort to bring anything into being. The effort here is to stay awake to the processes of one's own mind, with a deep confidence in the progressive trend in reality as one senses it within oneself, however dimly.

The Buddha as the focus of faith

The Dhamma life, exemplified here by the System of Meditation, depends on faith in the progressive trend in conditionality, especially as manifested in the kamma- and dhammaniyamas. One must have confidence in the mechanism, so to speak, that makes progress possible if one is to exert oneself on the Path and overcome its many obstacles and difficulties. But that is not enough. Even that faith is not sustainable unless there is some focus for one's devotion, some higher object for one's aspiration, to which one can look up and that one can revere.¹⁹ If there is no such higher devotional object progress must appear as a progress in self – which is really no progress at all. Progress is, in the end, progress in selftranscendence. For real progress to be possible, whether at the level of kamma-niyama or of dhamma-niyama, there must be a giving up of self to something beyond self that one serves and depends upon.²⁰

Sangharakshita sees the historical Buddha as the central focus of devotion and believes that we should keep him very much at the centre, not allowing other figures to usurp his place, if we are to preserve the integrity of the Dharma. All other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have their meaning through him: they are imaginal explorations of the Buddha's inner nature, personifications of his Enlightened qualities. All the figures on the Triratna Community's Refuge Tree, devised by Sangharakshita, achieve their significance through Sakyamuni.²¹

This is not merely a question of respect for our great human guide and teacher. If we are truly to give ourselves to something it must be more than human. The Buddha attained and came to embody something that went altogether beyond our human understanding. For this reason, Sangharakshita provocatively suggests that we should see the Buddha as the Buddhist God – the 'God who did not create the universe'!²² This ironic proposal challenges the humanistic interpretation of the Buddha, inviting us to recognise that he has 'gone altogether beyond' and dwells in a sphere to which we have as yet no direct access. Devotion here implies something of awe – of the sacred or numinous.

Devotion begins where rational understanding falters. Faith in the Buddha Sakyamuni, as our ideal and the fulfilment of the progressive trend in conditionality, takes over where rational explanations run out. Right View in the form of pratitya-samutpada, understood in terms of the two trends and the five niyamas, gives us the understanding we need to follow the Path. But it offers little by way of explanation: why does one thing arise in dependence on another? What is the driver of evolution? Especially it gives us no grasp on what lies beyond the merely human. What is the nature of a Buddha's experience, especially after his Parinirvana? Sangharakshita has been intrigued and inspired by the Garava-sutta, in which we find that even the Buddha feels the need to revere and rely upon something, and sees that it is only the Dharma that he can worship. Clearly here Dharma is not just his own teaching, but it must be something more than a principle, for one can scarcely revere a principle. What is it that the Buddha relies upon?²³

We must accept the limits of rational understanding and beware of terminology that appears to explain what is inexplicable, inevitably falling into the reified absolutes of eternalism. We must also not get trapped into a nihilistic dismissal of all meaning and value because we've reached the limits of reason. Buddhism invites us to accept that the Dharma transcends our rational understanding.²⁴ It has no 'mania for explanation', Sangharakshita says. Certainty is bad for you, spiritually speaking, whether about one's own experience or about the nature of things: there is wisdom in insecurity.²⁵ The Bodhisattva stands on a position that is devoid of a support, as the Ratnagunasamcayagatha has it. One must accept that there is a mystery beyond what reason is capable of telling us. 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'²⁶

The fact that reason has limits does not mean that one cannot approach or enter that mystery, but one must do so with another faculty than that of reason. That faculty is the spiritual imagination that transcends reason, using the language of ritual and devotion, of poetry and art, of symbol and archetype, especially in the form of the visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the sambhogakaya.²⁷ The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas take us into the depths of who the Buddha is, giving us some imaginative glimpse of and relationship with his Enlightenment.

Sangharakshita suggests that the need to give some content to what it was that the Buddha 'revered and relied upon' was fulfilled in the Sukhavati-vyuha-sutras by the image of the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha, so to speak, beyond the Buddha. What even the Buddha reveres cannot be merely a body of teachings, nor yet simply a principle, yet it cannot be some kind of eternal Creator-god. However, we misunderstand it if we think of it as impersonal – as Sangharakshita says, if we see it as

impersonal it will 'feel' sub-personal to us, since our ordinary experience only deals in the categories of personal and sub-personal (if you like, the kamma-niyama, on the one hand, and the utu-, bija-, and mano-niyamas on the other). Sangharakshita says in *The Three Jewels*, 'The dharmakaya is not impersonal in the sense that it utterly and completely excludes personality, for that would be to identify it with one of two opposite terms, whereas the truth of the matter is that, being non-different from Absolute Reality[!], the dharmakaya transcends all opposites whatsoever.'²⁸ Insofar as it is almost impossible for us to consider anything that is not included in one or other of these two opposites, it is more accurate to think of – or, better, imagine – the object of the Buddha's reverence as supra-personal, rather than either personal or impersonal. That is what the figure of the Buddha Amitabha represents: the eternal Buddha to whom even the historical Buddha looks up. His image is food for the illumined imagination, which must take over and continue where reason has flown as high as it may.

But symbols and archetypes are multivalent. Even these visionary figures are capable of misleading, unless they are linked to a clear expression and understanding of Right View – after all a suicide bomber may be inspired by an archetype.²⁹ Sangharakshita considers that all Buddhist archetypes need to be anchored in the image of the historical Buddha, who is the enunciator of *pratitya-samutpada*. The full meaning of the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can only clearly be recognised if they are seen through the Buddha Sakyamuni, whose inner reality they represent and from whose historical personality they have emerged.

For Sangharakshita the figure of the historical Buddha is the key. Instead of resorting to abstractions, we should focus on his life and teaching, to give us the confidence and courage we need to practise the Dharma, without danger of falling into views.³⁰ We can plunge more deeply into the mystery of his Enlightened nature by contemplating and worshipping the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which embody his inner character, thereby engaging our uplifted imaginations, beyond mere reason and emotion. The Buddha Sakyamuni exemplifies the Path, as well as embodying the process inherent in reality that makes Buddhahood possible. When we contemplate the Buddha, we hold before us the fact that the progressive potential of conditionality is always present and actualises whenever we choose to set up the conditions in dependence upon which it unfolds. Right View consists in seeing this clearly, without the eternalism of reified abstractions or the nihilism of a meaningless and valueless universe. This is the fundamental 'philosophical' position of the Triratna Community, insofar as it follows Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma.

Endnotes

1 Endnotes are of two kinds: details of references in the text and additional comments on points raised. These latter are not essential to following and understanding the argument, but are often points Sangharakshita made in our discussions that did not fit the main flow of the piece, but seemed too valuable to lose altogether. Some are simply my own reflections. I suggest that they are only referred to on a second reading. All translations from the Pali are by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

In this connection, Sangharakshita quotes a very interesting saying of William Blake's, 'Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth'.

He says of himself, 'If I read Schopenhauer, I become a Schopenhauerian; if I read Plotinus, I become a Neoplatonist.' He says that he empathises first and later engages his critical faculties. This is also true of Buddhist teachings.

2 There is another factor to be born in mind looking at his exposition of such teachings. Sangharakshita was giving his account on the basis of the scholarship available in English at the time. Buddhology has developed very greatly in the last 50 years and quite a lot is now known about, for instance, the origins of the Mahayana, the teachings and development of the Yogacara school, or even the evolution of the Pali Canon that was not recognised when he was giving some of his lectures and seminars on such topics. We must then take into account the most recent and well-established findings of modern scholarship on philology and textual history, as well as Sangharakshita's purpose and attitude in speaking about Buddhist traditions.

3 See Brahmajala-sutta, DN1.3.32: The Buddha speaks of each of the views as being 'merely the feeling (vedana) of those who do not know and see...' and then traces the nidanas back from vedana.

4 See especially the Kaccanagotta-sutta, SN12.15.

5 DN1

6 The Buddha speaks of straightening out views (ditthi ca ujuka), together with completely purifying morality, as 'purifying the starting point of wholesome states', which is the basis for the practice of the satipatthanas. SN47.3.

7 e.g. KN.Sn.IV.8&9.

8 MN72: Aggi-vaccagotta-sutta. Later tradition, especially that initiated by Nagarjuna, demonstrated that it was not simply that he would not answer because it was not useful to do so, but that any possible answers would lead to self-contradiction: it was the questions themselves that were the problem, because of the assumptions on which they rested.

9 MN26.12.

10 At the time, Sangharakshita had, of course, his own justification for his usages, although he would not employ many of them now. He has, for instance, often been called to account for his use of 'The Unconditioned', especially in

relation to Nirvana, whilst also asserting that Nirvana arises as the expositional endpoint of a conditioned process. He acquits himself brilliantly by distinguishing between spatial and temporal metaphors and between doctrinal and methodological viewpoints. Nirvana, viewed from the perspective of one who has attained it, is unconditioned (or more accurately 'unconfected', a more etymologically correct translation of *asamskrta*) in a spatial sense, insofar as it is 'impartible', not made up of anything. However, from the point of view of one setting out to attain it, it is conditioned, insofar as the experience of Nirvana arises at the end of a temporal sequence of conditionally arising states.

Significant as this may be, it is perhaps not necessary to engage with the term in this way at all. In the Suttas, the Buddha in all cases but one, and that probably a late addition to the canon, uses 'unconditioned' to mean unconditioned by something in particular – usually greed, hatred, and delusion. That usage seems to have been turned by later followers into an abstraction. Sangharakshita inherited that abstraction and made good sense of it.

(For *asamskrta* [*asamkhata*] in the Suttas, see SN43: *Asamkhatasamyutta*. For the exception see AN152. With thanks to Sagaramati, who has rightly been emphasising this point for many years!)

A similar movement from non-metaphysical usage in the Sutta-Pitaka to a metaphysical one in the Abhidhamma and the commentaries can be seen in the understanding and interpretation of the term Nibbana. It begins as a metaphor, 'becoming cool', for a 'psychological' experience, and gradually acquires metaphysical significance.

11 It is not a view in the sense that it is a description of the fundamental characteristic that can be recognised in all things, rather than an all-inclusive reality, so to speak, containing all things.

12 In the *Atthasalini*, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Dhammasamgani* of the Abhidhamma Pitaka (see the English translation, *The Expositor*, p360), and in his commentary on DN14.1.17, *Mahapadana-sutta*.

13 Sangharakshita first learned of the five *niyama* from the writings of the British scholar, Mrs Caroline Rhys Davids, for whose sharp eye for significant detail we in the Triratna Community owe a considerable debt of gratitude. See *Buddhism*, Mrs Rhys Davids.

Interestingly, Dr Ambedkar also shows knowledge of this little-known schema, perhaps also getting it from Mrs Rhys Davids. He uses it especially to show that caste has nothing to do with karma. The Buddha and His Dhamma, BkIII, part 3, Section 6: To believe that Karma is the instrument of Moral Order is Dhamma.

14 There is glimpse here of the very complex interrelationship between the *niyamas*, for the *kamma-niyama* brings its effects partly through the lower *niyamas*. There is much more to be said about this, and about the passing of karmic effects from one life to another through the other *niyamas*, as well as about the *dhamma-niyama* in relation to the rest.

15 See *The Niyama Dipani (The Manual of Cosmic Order)* by Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw, available at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/ledinyama.htm#5foldniyama>.

16 This is a point the Buddha makes again and again. For instance, he urges his disciples not to 'reflect upon the world', i.e. its origins and functioning, because it is 'not beneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and does not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana'. What he encourages us to think about is the Four Noble Truths: how to end suffering. SN56.41.

17 See also Sagaramati's significant paper, *Two Cheers for Tanha*.

18 Sangharakshita stresses that it is important not merely to see through, but actively to renounce, otherwise insight does not penetrate deep into experience. The affective and cognitive aspects of delusion are closely intertwined, but it is easy to fool ourselves that we have seen through, when we have merely made an intellectual adjustment of a self-flattering kind.

19 It is this point that I believe Dr Ambedkar is making when he insists that Morality (which he equates with Dhamma) must be 'sacred'. He argues that, without that sacred awe, most people would revert to self-interest and therefore to the non-morality of the most powerful. No doubt in the Indian context 'sacred' (pavitra in Hindi) requires no explanation, but it is the sense of something beyond human understanding that is of sublime, awe-inspiring, and overwhelming power and splendour that commands our reverence and devotion. The Buddha and His Dhamma, Bk IV, part 1, sect. 6: Mere Morality is not Enough. It must be Sacred and Universal.

20 This is necessary at any time, but is all the more necessary because of the prevailing nihilistic materialism of much of modern culture and the widespread ethos of self-fulfilment – the fulfilment of a self bounded within one life alone.

21 Sangharakshita has, of course, recently been tidying up his way of understanding the Triratna Community's Refuge Tree – another example of the unfolding of his own teaching. He now sees the Refuge Tree as essentially about Going for Refuge to the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. The Teachers of the Past are not on the Tree as Refuges, but as 'great Buddhist spiritual heroes', followers of the Buddha, whom we may respect very highly even though we should not accept their teachings uncritically. The Teachers of the Present represent Triratna Community's immediate spiritual background, and again are not objects of Refuge. Both Teachers of the Past and Present are of course worthy of respect – Sangharakshita now calls the Tree the Tree of Refuge and Respect.

All the other figures, together with those members of the Triratna Order meditate upon in sadhana practice, are Archetypes of Enlightenment. When we Go for Refuge to them as Archetypes of Enlightenment, we are in reality Going for Refuge to Sakyamuni, because it is through him that we know of the Enlightenment of which they are personifications. Milarepa and Padmasambhava are, incidentally, rather problematic since they appear on the Tree as 'spiritual

heroes', but in their respective sadhanas as Archetypes of Enlightenment – essentially because their historical and archetypal characters are distinguishable.

Sangharakshita is here making some very important points that may appear a little surprising. They merit much fuller treatment. The main issue is the need to recognise and maintain Sakyamuni's central place in the Buddhist life, as the intersection of the historical with the suprahistorical. Maintaining his central place is vital to the future unity of the Triratna Order – and indeed to the future of Buddhism worldwide – but also to preserving the balance of clear understanding and imaginative inspiration, which can only be united in his figure.

22 It seems that when Christian missionaries first arrived in Thailand they found there was no word for God in Thai – so they coined the phrase 'The Buddha Who Created the Universe'. Sangharakshita rather mischievously proposes calling the Buddha, 'The God Who Did Not Create the Universe'! This is not entirely farfetched. The notion of God has three principal aspects: creator, keeper of the moral order, and ideal. For Buddhists the question of creation does not arise. Buddhists do not require any cosmic agency to reward and punish since the moral order is natural, structured into reality in the form of kamma-niyama conditionality. However the Buddha is our ideal and embodies the goal of our spiritual life. It is because of him that we have encountered the Dharma at all in this life. He therefore, in that respect, fills for us the place of God in the theistic religions and we should not deprive ourselves of the opportunity to feel devotion because we are squeamish about God – even if we do not, no doubt for very good reasons, adopt Sangharakshita's ironically suggested terminology!

23 In the Garava-sutta, the Buddha, immediately after his Bodhi, recognises that not to 'revere and rely upon' anything is a source of suffering. He realises that there is no one alive to whom he can look up or depend upon, so he decides to dwell revering and relying upon the Dharma. SNI.6.2. Sangharakshita wondered what went through Bhikkhu Bodhi's mind as he translated this remarkable sutta, which seems not to have excited much comment in Theravada tradition. It opens up quite a mystery that even the Buddha must 'reverence and rely upon' something.

24 'It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this Dhamma, Vaccha, is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.' Aggi-vacchagotta-sutta, MN72.18.

25 This should apply to our thinking and talking about our own spiritual life also. We should not prematurely try to force whatever arises in meditation, for instance, into the straitjacket of Buddhist terminology, applying traditional labels as a way of saying what happened. Nor should we try to calibrate our experience, fitting it into one or other hierarchical schema. We should simply forget traditional categories, Sangharakshita says, and, if it is genuinely helpful to speak of what happened at all, we should simply describe as best we can the 'raw' experience. In many cases, 'claims' are innocently made through inadequacy of expression and understanding, seizing upon the nearest label that seems appropriate.

26 Ratnagunasamcayagatha, II.3; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7: the closing words of the work.

27 In our discussions, Sangharakshita remarked on the way in which *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, a Chinese work attributed apocryphally to Asvaghosa, first attempts some very complex metaphysics to explain conundrums posed by its own presuppositions and then takes refuge in a poetic image to make its point: the mutual perfuming of samsara and nirvana. The image communicates something of real spiritual significance, which Sangharakshita has found very appealing, whilst the philosophical arguments seem irrelevant, and even dangerous. Similarly Sangharakshita considers that Plato is at his best when he communicates through myth, such as the myth of the cave in *The Republic* and Diotima's teaching about the divinity of Love in *The Symposium*.

Incidentally, Sangharakshita commented that *The Awakening of Faith* finally resorts to an exposition of the ten precepts, the law of karma, and samatha and vipasyana - because in the end that is what it all comes down to: you have to practise the Dharma.

28 (Part 1, sect. 5)

29 A quick search of websites referring to figures from the Buddhist archetypal pantheon will turn up many references that have nothing to do with the Dharma. One will find Buddhist figures put to all sorts of New Age, esoteric, or psychological uses – often with great authority and conviction.

30 Sangharakshita suggests that members of the Triratna Community should make far more use in teaching and practice of the Jatakas, especially the canonical ones, since these present the long struggles over many lifetimes that preceded the Buddha's Enlightenment. This gives us perspective on our own spiritual efforts, both in terms of the magnitude of what is to be done and of the wonder of it. The stories illustrate his 'taking the lead' in lifetime after lifetime, whether as a great king serving his people or as a sage who brings the decisive wisdom that saves the situation. This offers an inspiring example of what is to be done.

Re-Imagining The Buddha

PREFACE

Towards the end of August, 2010, Subhuti and I had a series of discussions centred on the topic of the imagination. I had long wanted to talk to Subhuti on this topic because I had a few new ideas which I wished to communicate. Subhuti managed to make himself available for a few days and we had the discussions in question at my Madhyamaloka flat. Our starting point was the subject of animism, on which I had been reflecting. In fact I reminded Subhuti that many years ago, when I was still living in Kalimpong, I had written a poem with the title 'Animist'. From animism we branched out first to empathy, then to ethics and aesthetics, and finally to the imagination or imaginal faculty. This led us to a quite wide ranging exploration of the spiritual life, including meditation, and faith in, and devotion to, the historical Buddha. Our discussion was not at all systematic, especially as I kept remembering things I wanted to say, and as Subhuti did his best to draw me out on certain points. I am therefore extremely grateful to Subhuti for not just writing up our discussions but for presenting them in a more organised and systematic manner. The title he has given to this article, 'Re-imagining the Buddha', very well encapsulates the overall thrust of our discussion. I very much hope that this article will be a source of inspiration to all Order members and have the effect of clarifying the place of the imagination in the spiritual life.

(Sd) Urgyen Sangharakshita Madhyamaloka 28/11/2010

RE-IMAGINING THE BUDDHA

SUBHUTI

I feel it is also important to have this, so to speak, magical element, not just in our lives generally but especially in our spiritual lives. And it is symbol, myth, ritual which help give life this magical element - you might say also imaginative element.

Sangharakshita, European Order Weekend, August 2010

To live the Buddhist life, to become like the Buddha, we must imagine the Buddha. The goal must be embodied in our imaginations, our deepest energies gathered in an image of what we are trying to move towards. Yet, images and imagination are either problematic or unimportant for many today. This is because we live amidst broken images – images that are not merely broken but debased. And the true value and possibility of imagination has largely been lost. This is the present context for the development of Buddhism.¹

In the Western, post-Christian world, the Buddhist today is tangled in a triple complexity of imagination. We stand in a problematic relationship with much of our cultural heritage. We have rejected Christianity and therefore have the difficult and subtle task of reaching behind the doctrinal significance of its ubiquitous images and myths to their raw psychic power. Where such images are expressed in art, we must suspend our emotional responses to the religion they serve and allow whatever beauty they contain to speak directly to our aesthetic sensibilities.²

This is not a simple matter – but it is yet more demanding because of the historical twists and turns of Christianity's own attitude to images, all layered into our cultural assumptions. In establishing itself as the dominant religion in Europe, Christianity suppressed the pagan gods of popular religion, abrogating to itself all thaumaturgic power and consigning all other magic to the devil, sometimes with a ferocity that itself seems demonic. This was a war against evil that lasted well into the seventeenth century and still finds its echo in contemporary rhetoric.

This first breaking of images was succeeded by a second: the Protestant Reformation with its yet more savage and thorough iconoclasm, that in its most extreme forms now condemned almost all imagery to the devil. The Roman Church retained its images intact, but the defence it had to mount introduced a new self-consciousness and sentimentality that was itself a kind of destruction or at least decay. Only in parts of southern Europe and in Latin America does a quasi-pagan imaginative wealth survive.

The Reformation led inexorably to the rise of the rationalism and scientism that have enthroned the material world, leaving the realms of myth and imagination to pathology, politics – or worse: to mere entertainment. This third iconoclasm is now a worldwide influence and is the most destructive global legacy of the colonial and commercial power of the West. Images that once expressed deep meaning are now commonplaces and advertising clichés.³

Of course, Christianity never succeeded in completely colonising all imaginative life: there were alternative traditions. Classical Greece and Rome were the educators of Christian Europe and their gods and nymphs

persisted in the minds of the cultivated in uneasy symbiosis with saints and martyrs, alternately justified and reviled. Neoplatonism and Alchemy had a powerful influence on many important thinkers over the centuries. And the old folk gods did live on into the last century in beliefs about Robin Goodfellow and the like. In more recent times, C. G. Jung and the analytical psychologists who followed him have taken the realm of imagination very seriously indeed and made important discoveries about it that can be of great assistance to the Buddhist today.

Despite these alternative traditions, the depth and power of images is not widely appreciated in the West today and what images we have are mostly broken or leached of significance. These are some of the difficulties amidst which the Western Buddhist must imagine the Buddha. In India the issues are different, although overlapping. Contemporary Indian Buddhist live amidst Buddhist images that have literally been broken, for Buddhist culture was the victim of both the fanatical despoliations of Muslim invaders and the more persistent and systematic extirpations of the Brahminic 'counter-revolution'.⁴ Their gaze back into history leaves them with great pride in their ancient heritage and deep sadness and even anger at the political, social, and cultural processes that have deprived them of it – and that still seek to deny the truth about India's past.

Followers of Dr Ambedkar who have turned to Buddhism to escape their oppressive station in the Hindu caste system have understandably turned away – and turned away with revulsion – from the overwhelming profusion of Hindu imagery, with its 'thirty-three crore gods'.⁵ Many educated Dalit Buddhists have taken to a narrow rationalism, with Bertrand Russell as the presiding genius. This rationalism is often fathered on Dr Ambedkar, although he himself was well aware of the power and importance of myth and symbol – indeed we have his outline of an intended book on the subject.⁶

Dr Ambedkar's great contribution to Buddhism is to have connected the Dharma so effectively with social transformation, both in theory and in practice. But among many of his followers the Dharma is lost in the politics and Buddhism is understood merely in terms of the scientism and materialism that is really the product of the post-Christian West. Dr Ambedkar himself was vividly aware of the 'sacred' power and depth of the Dharma – and saw that without that sacred dimension there can be no moral order in society.⁷ His followers now need to free themselves from a shallow rationalism and discover an imaginative life that does not lead them back into Hinduism, which means back into caste and the ignorance and exploitation of superstition.

Even in the old Buddhist world with its unbroken traditions, modernity poses a major challenge that few have yet successfully answered. Everywhere Buddhists face, from different points of view and within different cultural contexts, the question of how to imagine the Buddha today. Organisational and doctrinal questions aside, how is Enlightenment to appear in the imaginations of men and women today?

Sangharakshita founded the Triratna Buddhist Order unconstrained by any particular Buddhist cultural tradition and its members are therefore uniquely placed to rediscover the image of the Buddha. The Order has, both in the West and in India, wrestled with these issues over the last forty years, with varying degrees of selfconsciousness and even more variable success. There have been some notable developments in a native Buddhist art: the colossal statue of the standing Buddha at Nagaloka in Nagpur, India, being a recent example, blending as it does Far Eastern and contemporary Indian sensibilities. Often, however, our iconography and ritual, principally in the West, suggest a deviant Tibetan sect – and this potentially creates great difficulties for our work in India, where Tibetan imagery is indistinguishable from the Hindu variety, and it also greatly limits us in the West, appealing imaginatively to a minority, either attracted to it for its rich exoticism or able to perform the difficult task of separating deep archetypes from the cultural expressions that clothe them.

Dividing my time between both India and the West, I have become more and more aware of the challenge we face. In the first place there is a danger that the imaginative sensibility of people in our movement in the West becomes increasingly out of key with that of our brothers and sisters in India. Given the wide cultural differences, there must inevitably be a considerable difference of imaginative form. Nonetheless, without an underlying unity of imagery it will be increasingly difficult for Indians and Westerners to identify themselves as members of a single spiritual community, with all the opportunities that brings for a sense of shared humanity, beyond cultural difference.

But there is a deeper issue, going to the heart of what it is to lead the Dharma life: unless we can truly imagine the Buddha and his Enlightenment in a way that stirs us deeply we cannot mobilise our energies to Go for Refuge to him. We can only imagine the Buddha wholeheartedly by discovering his image in our own minds, inspired and supported by the images around us. Images of this kind cannot be ordered or devised. They must live and grow and, like plants, they must emerge from their own natural environments: the psyches of the individuals in which they appear and the cultures in which those psyches have developed. Broken and debased images cannot easily be exchanged for images from alien cultures, however genuine, powerful, and effective they

may be in their own contexts. Buddhists today, especially those from outside the old Buddhist world, have embarked on a long and difficult journey to discover the image of the Buddha within themselves and to allow that image a natural expression in their own cultures. This work is more akin to magic than to science.

Sangharakshita has had quite a bit to say about the broad field of imagination, setting the outlines of a new Buddhist theory of imagination.⁸ It has seemed to me that this needs wider understanding and currency amongst us and a more thorough absorption into the life and practice of the Order and movement. In August this year I therefore had a series of conversations with him on this topic, to see if any new light could be shed. Our conversations were recorded and I have written this article in my own words on the basis of transcripts of those recordings, although I have expanded considerably upon what Sangharakshita said on this and other occasions and given my own interpretation of what I think he meant or implied. Perhaps I could more exactly describe this as a set of variations on themes by Sangharakshita. I have shown what I have written to him and, once more, he confirms that I have accurately represented his thinking – as accurately as is possible in another's words and style. What emerged from our discussions was a clear confirmation of what he has said many times before, but in certain respects it went much further and deeper. Sangharakshita once again calls on us to be much more radical, especially in our search for the Buddha's image.

IMAGINATION IN THE DHARMA LIFE

In my article, *Revering and Relying upon the Dharma*, I set out Sangharakshita's thoughts on the nature of Right View. I tried to show how *pratītya-samutpāda* is not a theory about reality but a description of the conditioned relationships that we can observe underlying everything. I did this especially by referring to the five *niyāmas*, which are the categories under which the regularities that govern every aspect of our experience can be understood. Reason can do no more than recognise and investigate these conditioned regularities. The Buddha therefore very actively resisted all attempts to get him to speculate about the origins or purpose of reality and Sangharakshita wants us to follow him in this very rigorously. What lies beyond is mystery – or, better, the mystery. The mystery cannot of course be explained conceptually and 'Buddhism has no mania for explanation'. But, the mystery can be explored – indeed, it must be if we are to live the Dharma life. 'Where reason has flown as high as it may', it is the 'illuminated imagination' that 'must take over and continue'.⁹

What then is the imagination? Sangharakshita uses this term and its synonym, the 'imaginal faculty', sometimes capitalised, as key elements in his exploration of what the Dharma life consists in. His invocation of it is inspired especially by his reading of the English Romantic poet and literary critic, S. T. Coleridge, whom he considers arguably England's greatest thinker, although crippled by his inability to think beyond Christianity. The more unequivocal poetics of William Blake has also greatly influenced his vision in this respect.¹⁰

Coleridge was concerned to understand the creative process, of which he had had such powerful experience, and to rescue it from the mechanistic and deterministic psychology then developing. Imagination, to him, could not be captured by such reductive theories and to make this clear he contrasted it with what he called 'fancy'. Fancy is the mere routine assembling of images into new combinations without any deeper significance or real underlying connection. Imagination, however, modifies and gives unity to the images it blends, discovering in them moral and spiritual meaning. Coleridge saw imagination as a vital creative force that expressed itself most characteristically in the artist, but that was '...a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.¹¹

Coleridge thought as a Christian, albeit a tortured and unconventional one, and his understanding of imagination is mixed up with his beliefs. We can however easily read what he had to say independent of his theology and that gives us a basis for approaching this important aspect of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma. Shorn of its theistic connotations, we could define imagination as a power or capacity of the individual, having in it something that is more than the individual, that transforms the objects of experience and unifies them. The four elements of this definition give us the key to how Sangharakshita understands imagination. It should be understood at the outset that image and imagination are not necessarily confined to the visual or its visionary counterpart. All the senses deliver images, including the less obvious ones, like the kinaesthetic sense or the sense of spatial location, and imagination can deal in subtle feelings that are not easy to convey in sensory terms. Thus one can imagine the Buddha without seeing anything, whether literally or in one's mind's eye.

Imagination is a power or capacity or even faculty of the individual. While this discussion of imagination has begun in the context of artistic creation, imagination is not at all confined to the artist or even to the appreciation of art, although these may be our most familiar and ready sources of illustration. Everyone has that faculty of imagination as a

potentiality and it is the essential vehicle of all genuine moral, aesthetic, and spiritual life.

As a potentiality it is intrinsic to the human mind. It does not however actively function in everyone, or at least it does not function as a dominant or controlling force and is not at all conscious. It must be recognised, educated, and cultivated if it is to come into decisive play. The metaphor of faculty teaches us the attitude we need if that cultivation and education are to take place. It is not a matter of constructing something or bringing something into being, but of discovering a capacity we already have, identifying it and giving it importance – just as athletes might develop bodily skills they were born with once they recognise their capacity. We each need to feed the imaginal faculty we already have so it grows in range and vitality and plays an increasingly significant part in our lives.

Every metaphor has a front and a back: it suggests a meaning we want to indicate and yet it connotes, to the unwary or unwilling, significance we do not intend. 'Power', 'capacity', and 'faculty' all suggest a something separate from them that possesses them – in this case, the possessor is 'me'. At the outset, we need to think of imagination as a faculty that is part of us because we have not yet experienced it or recognised it. We have to think of it as there in potential so that we can discover and develop it. But, as imagination begins to flourish more and more freely, it becomes clear that it is not merely a power of the mind that we own, but the mind itself. It is not something we have, but something we are. It is not part of us, but the whole. We are imagination.

There is another significance to the metaphor of a faculty, especially when thought of as analogous to the sense faculties. Imagination has direct access to its objects, in contrast to reason, which deals with concepts derived from experience. It is a means of knowing, its truths being symbolic rather than conceptual. As it matures, imagination becomes the faculty of faculties, combining and transcending reason, emotion, and the senses, whether physical or visionary.

Those who are truly creative know very well that imagination has in it something that is more than the individual. One cannot say that the poem or painting or music came from oneself, if it is at all successful; one did not will it: the creation seemed to will itself. This is important for us to understand if we wish to develop our imaginations. For the imagination to flower we must suspend our willing and allow something new to arise from beyond our conscious identity. There must be something like what Keats called 'negative capability', a receptive attitude that has us attentive without will or expectation or urge to resolve – no 'mania for explanation'.¹² The inspiration is caught out of the corner of one's eye, not

in the sharp focus of a stare. In this sense one is not the author of one's creation but its witness and vehicle. What is that something supra-personal by which imagination is touched? We need invoke no god or other higher power, but simply refer to the schema of the *niyāmas*. As one acts more and more skilfully one's experience unfolds in more subtle, rich and satisfying ways, in accordance with the *karma* *niyāma*. One has experiences that go beyond one's previous way of seeing things. These may come gently and gradually or abruptly, even disruptively. Sometimes, perhaps even characteristically, they will appear other and one will feel one is in touch with something beyond oneself, even that one is taken over by something from another dimension. In the Dharma these experiences are understood, in the first place, in terms of the schema of the *triloka*: *karma*, *rūpa*, and *arūpa*: they may be experiences coming from the higher reaches of the sense-realm or else belong to the visionary worlds beyond the senses. Such experiences are not directly willed into existence: they arise in dependence on previous *karma* and they will transcend one's normal sense of oneself, appearing even as other than oneself. It is these dimensions that imagination in its lower forms touches.

However, imagination may fly yet higher and may be affected by conditioned processes arising under the heading of the Dharma *niyāma*. These arise once self-attachment is recognised for what it is and begins to be decisively weakened. What then unfolds within us is a series of states, each arising spontaneously out of the preceding and transcending it, beyond even our *karma*-based willing. The experience of imagination may then be the stirrings of those Dharma *niyāma* processes, or at least stirrings of stirrings. When imagination touches these dimensions, Sangharakshita calls it the 'illuminated imagination'.¹³

In more traditional Buddhist terms, the Dharma *niyāma* is first felt distantly in *samyag dr̥ṣṭi* or Right View, which is not a mere conceptual grasp, but a leap to the inescapable truth of the Dharma in a moment of experience – in a moment of imagination. One could even say that that initial *samyag dr̥ṣṭi* is the discovery of the imaginal faculty as the vehicle for the Dharma life – as is suggested by the word '*dr̥ṣṭi*', 'seeing'. Once one enters the stream of the Dharma, imagination becomes the major character of one's awareness, and it grows more and more dominant as one progresses. One increasingly becomes imagination and acts in harmony with universal forces that are more than personal. In a phrase, imagination is the faculty of self-transcendence.

Those who are authentic artists have access certainly to the karmic level of imagination and the greatest may perhaps touch on Dharma *niyāma* experience. Though they have access to imagination at these levels, they are often unable to remain at those heights. This famously

leads many to exhibit a double character, both as godlike surveyors of higher truth and as all too fallible human beings – they have temporary access to a dimension that they cannot dwell in and that is at odds, even at war, with their ordinary character. Coleridge himself was an outstanding and tragic example of the artist's dual nature.

Imagination transforms the objects of experience; fancy, by contrast, merely rearranges them into new patterns without altering their fundamental character as objects. The world is seen by fancy as but an arena for bodily survival and enjoyment, and it perceives mechanically, simply taking the data of our experience and arranging it for the avoidance of pain and gaining of pleasure. By means of imagination, however, we pass beyond that animal-like existence. In imagination the data is spontaneously selected, organised, and transformed in ways that draw out its inner meaning or expresses a fundamental truth beyond conceptual understanding. The image, experienced through whatsoever sensory medium, transcends the data from which it springs. Through the image, our intimations of deeper meaning are given a form by which we ourselves can come to know them. The components of the image are transformed into a symbol of something far beyond their value to us as mere intelligent animals.

Symbols are characteristic creations of the imagination, combining imaginative form with deep meaning, beyond concepts. A symbol can be contrasted with a sign, the product of fancy, which is a kind of shorthand for a conceptual label or piece of information: for instance, an arrow on a road-sign shows the way to go. Though a symbol does communicate meaning, that meaning cannot be fully captured by any particular form of words, unless those words themselves become symbolic. Imagination in its fullness, when it becomes illumined, transforms all experience into symbol, embodying the deepest significance in all things.

It should be noted, of course, that we are speaking of the imagination transforming the image, the subject transforming the object, yet this is not always how one experiences it. It may often seem more that it is the image or symbol itself that transforms the one who experiences it. Experiencer and experienced, subject and object, imagination and image come into far closer interaction, transcending our usual categories of perception. This has sometimes been described as 'inter-subjectivity': the other is experienced not as an object but as another experiencing subject, the same as oneself – in other words, one sees them more 'objectively', as they really are. Imagination unifies the objects of experience. Experience can be unified in either a quantitative or a qualitative sense. The mere act of perception unifies all objects of experience quantitatively by attributing them to a single field known by a single observer. Further, within that

single field and single observer, parts or aspects can be picked out as having some common characteristic and therefore belonging together: the arms, legs and head are all interpreted as parts of a single body. Unification here, one might say, is logical: it follows the 'laws of thought'.¹⁴

Imagination unifies qualitatively. It unifies experience, or those aspects of experience it selects, objectively by discovering in them a unifying meaning that is expressed by their combination and transformation - it unifies by transforming them into symbols. Such qualitative unification is not subject to the laws of logic: symbols can mean many things, even contradictory ones, at the same time – an image of an old man might, in a dream, signify time's inexorable decay and, at the same time, deep and abiding wisdom.

Imagination also unifies the subject – or better is the unification of the subject. As imagination emerges, it draws together and transcends the faculties of the mind as they ordinarily function within us, so they cease to appear in our lives as conflicting, even irreconcilable, perspectives. It integrates the cognitive, emotional, and volitional with a subtle and refined sensation in a single harmonious act of awareness. Such experience brings a deepening satisfaction and pleasure, a feeling of harmony and sympathy, even of love. This unification is what is implied by the Pali and Sanskrit word *samādhi*, which connotes the same integration of the mind's powers. Indeed, for many seriously practising Buddhists, meditative absorption will be their readiest experience of imagination.

From these qualities of imagination, another follows: imagination is dynamic and 'ascending'. The images that imagination feeds upon stand between the ordinary world of sense form and the highest realms of transcendental meaning. Imagination is the intermediary, bringing down to us intimations of truths beyond us and carrying us up towards them. The 'ascent' of imagination is through a hierarchy of progressively more subtle and fulfilling encounters with imaginative meaning. In the Buddha's own teaching, this hierarchy of ascent is explored in terms of the three lokas, each with its sub-categories of heavenly worlds. The higher reaches of the *kāmaloka* yield aesthetic sensations of exquisite subtlety and one resonates deeply with the life in all things around one. In the *rūpaloka* one dwells in a dimension of visionary experience, not necessarily mediated by the visual faculty, full of symbolic resonance. Beyond that, in the *arūpaloka*, one plunges into the depths of consciousness, resting in fundamental qualities that defy language.

At every level, the experience is more and more complete, combining – unifying – all aspects of awareness yet more harmoniously. In particular,

there is a deepening aesthetic pleasure at the same time as an intensifying revelation of the true meaning of things: a powerful sense of satisfaction, that is both aesthetic and cognitive. These experiences are however mundane, in the sense that they must be sustained by karmic effort, since they lack *prajñā*, transcendental insight. Imagination at this level therefore waxes and wanes with the karmic forces that sustain it. Only illumined imagination is constant, and that arises once imagination decisively integrates with the ultimate truth of things. Imagination then becomes the faculty of *prajñā*, whilst previously it had been the medium of *śraddhā*. In the final flowering of imagination, there is only imagination and all that is seen is the image of truth. This is perhaps represented in Mahayana Buddhism by the Jina Vairocana, the Illuminator, who has the *dharmadhātujñāna*, the wisdom that perceives the Dharma in all things.

To complete this exploration of Sangharakshita's understanding of imagination, we must examine one more matter: the ontology of the imagination. Imagination is how we perceive and what we become when we let go of a merely mechanical perception and allow our experience to be invested with symbolic meaning. We then inhabit a world of significant images, some of which are directly derived from our physical senses, while others appear as intuitions, dreams, or visions, or as artists' creations. In most cultures until the modern era, many such images are personifications, especially of gods and spirits. Of course, as commonly represented they are often not truly creations of imagination at all, but merely signs, the mechanical reproductions of fancy. Nonetheless, usually behind the representations is some genuine imaginative experience. Such figures are found in early Buddhism, which took over ancient Indian cosmology and pantheon and 'converted' it. From this background, Mahayana Buddhism revealed a whole rich world filled with archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. But do these gods and spirits and these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas really exist as conscious beings, independent of our perceiving them? What is their existential status? What is the ontology of imagination?

Sangharakshita argues that the question is too literal, itself begging many questions: not least, what does one mean by 'exist'? Often such questioning is based on the materialist assumption that there is but a world of matter, with consciousness as a mere side-effect: either something is there as a measurable, material fact or it is not. The materialist dismisses the world of imagination almost as thoroughly as did Mr Gradgrind and demands, 'Facts, facts, facts'. If that world is dealt with at all in such an outlook, it is in the context of pathology or entertainment – or propaganda. But the imagination defies the logic of either 'is' or 'is not'. Imagination

knows no law of excluded middle: A can both be and not be. The Bodhisattvas and the gods exist independent of us – and they do not.

Before we descend irrevocably into a metaphysical quagmire, let us put the matter more straightforwardly. The visionary Bodhisattvas and gods probably do not exist in any material sense: they cannot be photographed, weighed, and measured, for instance, nor can they be contacted by telephone. But they do embody something deep in reality that is more akin to consciousness than to matter. Sangharakshita invokes a term he came across in recent Japanese philosophy that communicates the ontological character of these images: 'non-ontic existence'.¹⁵

Usually when we say that something does not exist we assume that it is therefore not important: what is important is what materially exists. However, moral values and spiritual truths have no material existence as such yet they are supremely significant – indeed, they are far more significant for us as human beings than any particular material object. They exist in this non-ontic sense. We should take symbols and other images of the imagination very seriously indeed on their own terms – arguably we should take them more seriously than we take the material world. This is the case even when, perhaps especially when, those symbols present themselves as conscious beings independent of us.

The issue requires some closer examination still. To explain how we should view these images, Sangharakshita invokes a largely forgotten German Philosopher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hans Vaihinger, who wrote a once influential book, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*.¹⁶ Vaihinger follows through the implications of the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, and indeed of Berkeley and Hume, accepting that we have no direct access to a reality external to us. What we perceive as a world of objects standing in causal relation to each other is a 'representational construction' – Schopenhauer's *Vorstellung*. We think of our experience as if there were real objects that causally affect each other, distributed in space around us. We do so because it works for practical purposes, even though it is an interpretation or construction that cannot do full justice to the reality of experience.

Vaihinger called this interpretation 'fiction' – although he did not mean what we usually understand by the word, an untrue story, but rather a story that gets as close to the truth as possible under particular circumstances for particular purposes. Usually we take this construction for reality itself, but we need not. Implicitly we should say to ourselves, 'This mysterious and indefinable experience is not really a table out there, but I will think of it as if it were one', and we think of it as if it were one because it is then

useful when we need something to put a book on (saying which, of course, involves more interpretations).

The gods and spirits, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas exist in this 'as if' sense – which actually is no different ontologically from what present themselves to us as material objects, in the sense that we may interpret them 'as if' they were conscious entities, independent of us, because that works under certain circumstances, for certain purposes. We see them that way because it is the best interpretation we can find of mysterious and indefinable experiences. From this point of view, the validity of an 'as if' interpretation is its effectiveness.¹⁷

But effectiveness itself must be defined by the ends that are served. For the purposes of physical survival and enjoyment, accepting an external world of causally related objects is effective on most occasions – as it is for leading the Dharma life while one has a human body. When we look for broader ends for our existence, accepting those personified archetypes of imagination as if they were consciousnesses independent of our own is effective from the moral and spiritual point of view, because it enables us to enter the world of imagination and ascend through its hierarchies to the full and final meaning of things.

All this is fully consistent with the Buddha's teaching. The Dharma does not deal in existence and non-existence as absolute categories: indeed, the Buddha explicitly rejected these, saying that, in the forms of eternalism and nihilism, they lead to grave moral and spiritual problems. He speaks instead of becoming and passing away. The key distinctions are epistemological, between ignorance and wisdom, and ethical, between skilful and unskilful, not ontological, between existence and non-existence. All things whatsoever are to be seen as impermanent and empty of substantial essence, and all mundane things are to be recognised as incapable of providing full and lasting happiness. This is the understanding to be cultivated in relation to any experience, no matter of what kind. The attitude that accompanies that understanding and creates the basis for its cultivation is one of *maitrī* towards all living things and *śraddhā* towards whatever embodies the Dharma.

To summarise: when we encounter any experience, we need not preoccupy ourselves with its metaphysical reality, with whether or not there really is a consciousness out there, independent of us. We try to see it as a conditioned arising and we approach it in an emotionally positive spirit, seeking to make good use of it for the true welfare of ourselves and of others. If that experience embodies the Dharma to any extent then we take it very seriously indeed and respond to it with faith and allow it to

influence and inspire us. When we encounter images of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we accept them in this spirit.

Whilst owing inspiration to the English Romantics, especially Coleridge and William Blake, Sangharakshita invests the term 'imagination' with firmly Dharmic significance, as the vehicle of the Dharma life, the faculty by which we come to know the truth of things – come to know it and, as it were, become it. We could speak of what Sangharakshita has said on this topic as developing a new Buddhist theory of imagination. But it should be clear that 'imagination' does not translate any particular Buddhist term, although several basic Buddhist concepts could be included under its heading. The need for such a term arises because of the special circumstances of the contemporary world in which the significance, even the reality, of that faculty has largely been lost because of the growth of materialism, with its glorification of the physical senses. This necessitates the identification of a different way of knowing. That need simply did not arise before in Buddhist history because the faculty was taken for granted as a cultural and personal reality. In this area, as with his emphasis on friendship, Sangharakshita is exploring values that traditional societies have simply assumed without comment but that require special identification today because of the particular cultural circumstances in which they have been largely devalued or even lost. Fortunately, there lie to hand within Western cultures the traditions, tools, and terms readily adaptable to Buddhist use.

If a Buddhist reference for imagination was required, a ready correlation could be made with the five cakkhus/cakṣus or eyes of both the Pali commentaries and the Mahayana, each with its own slightly different list. The basic idea is that there is a hierarchy of eyes: the 'fleshly' eye is the lowest, followed by the 'divine' eye of psychic power, then the 'Dharma' eye that sees things as they truly are, and beyond successive eyes of supreme realisation, variously described. Each of these eyes must be opened sequentially, each arising out of the preceding. The faculty of imagination operating on successively higher levels corresponds to all the eyes above the fleshly one – although 'eye' should be taken to include other sense faculties. In Sangharakshita's usage, those from the Dharma eye upwards comprise the scope of 'illuminated imagination'.

Invoking the notion of imagination calls up a larger conception of awareness as the stuff of Dharmic development - so often treated as if it was just our ordinary everyday consciousness that required a little sharpening. It is a much richer and fuller awareness, with far greater possibilities of enjoyment, understanding, and empathy. At the same time it is a definite possibility present within our experience now: from time to time, it will fly us beyond ourselves, in however limited and imperfect a

manner. This highly appealing potentiality of our experience is immediately accessible to us. If we want to develop imagination further we simply need to keep working at the karmas that are the conditions in dependence on which it flourishes: summed up in the old triad, *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*. But before we can develop imagination, we must recognise it within us as of central importance and give it the space to flourish.

This is one of Sangharakshita's most important messages, a teaching that enables us to understand better what is entailed in developing a Buddhist movement that is relevant to the situation all over the world today. Where the conceptual truths of the Dharma are concerned, we need to go back to what the Buddha himself taught, so far as we can know it, and apply it in our own situations, taking inspiration and guidance from later traditions. But where the culture and images of the Dharma are concerned, we must set out into the unknown on a journey of discovery. We need to discover what the Buddha looks like to us. We need to find the Buddha in our own imaginations and to allow his image to express itself in forms that we can respond to with every aspect of our being – with our imaginations, ultimately with our illumined imaginations. This is not a simple or quick task. Like any voyage of discovery, its destination is unknown and the period of travel uncertain. But it must be done if we ourselves are to live the Dharma life and if we are to plant the Dharma in the heart of the world today.

In my conversations with Sangharakshita on these topics, the theme of discovery and of developing a sensitivity we already have in potential arose again and again. We found ourselves especially concerned with discovering an imaginative sensitivity in three areas: empathy for life; response to the beautiful; and connecting with the image of the Buddha. The remainder of this paper will be concerned with Sangharakshita's thought in these three areas. It should be kept in mind throughout that, in discussing imagination, necessarily I will be calling upon the philosophy of 'as if'.

IMAGINATION AS EMPATHY

In *Living with Awareness*, Sangharakshita remarks, 'I would go so far as to say that a universe conceived of as dead cannot be a universe in which one stands any chance of attaining Enlightenment'.¹⁸ This intriguing statement seems of a piece with what he has said elsewhere about the need for a revival of paganism if Buddhism is truly to take root in the West. What does this mean?

One first remembers that, according to the Suttas, the Buddha lived on familiar terms with all kinds of non-human beings. There are a few stories of his sympathetic relations with animals, like the great tusker who, when once he was living alone in the forest, 'kept the spot where the Exalted One was staying free from grass, and with his trunk brought water for the use of the Exalted One'.¹⁹ He is shown entering into communication with various earth spirits who haunted shrines in lonely places. And he appears to have been on familiar terms with various sky-gods, such as Sakka, the king of the gods, who acts towards him with the deepest respect.²⁰ And he has access, at will, to the successively more subtle divine realms beyond that, each with its own angelic beings. His, indeed, is a richly animated world and he is presented as fully aware of it all and sympathetic to it.

Must the contemporary Buddhist rediscover the world as animate in this sense? Should we start making offerings to the ancient Indian gods or should we revive the *genii locorum* of wherever we happen to live – Woden in England, *Lleu Llaw Gyffes* in Wales...? Are English Buddhists, for instance, to become Neo-pagans, gathering at Stonehenge on Midsummer's dawn for ritual revels? It seems this is not at all what *Sangharakshita* means. The ancient gods and spirits of Europe are as alien to us now as are the rich theophanies of the East. We have lost our connection with them – and to be ignored is death to the gods, or at least to any particular manifestation of them. In any case, we do not – or rather most of us do not – see the world in that way any more.

What *Sangharakshita* is asserting is that we must rediscover the capacity directly to sense life in the world around us, even to empathise with it: a faculty that our ancestors had and that we too have innately, but that today we usually lose as we leave childhood, especially in a culture dominated by materialist assumptions. Pagans and animists, both of the past and in many cultures to this day, see every feature of their landscape as inhabited by gods and spirits to whom serious attention must be paid if one is to have a successful life. This capacity has been lost to many today. For the first time in world history, so far as we know, a widespread and increasingly dominant culture has developed in which the world is perceived by many as essentially dead and the animistic imagination is not widely valued – and is even scorned. No doubt much that was foolish and false has been cleared away by the European Enlightenment, which with the Protestant Reformation dealt the old animist sensibility a decisive blow, and many are now free from the exploitation and social control for which such superstition was commonly manipulated. However, a depth of connection with the living world has been widely lost and we are now the poorer for it.

In Western culture in modern times something of that capacity has survived among educated people principally in art, especially poetry, for many poets have been deeply concerned about this issue. The English Romantics were explicitly protesting against the growing materialism of their age, with its rationalising of human experience, by invoking a vivid sense of nature as alive. Sangharakshita himself seems to have retained this awareness throughout his life, expressed especially in his poetry. He communicates something of our contemporary predicament in an early poem written in Kalimpong in 1952:

ANIMIST

*I feel like going on my knees
To this old mountain and these trees.
Three or four thousand years ago
I could have worshipped them, I know.
But if one did so in this age
They'd lock him in a padded cage.
We've made the world look mean and small
And lost the wonder of it all.*²¹

It is important for us to rediscover this capacity for empathy with the life around us because it is the true basis of ethics. Whilst reflection on the nature of karma may induce us to repress our unskilful tendencies out of self-interest, this is only the beginning of ethics, helping us to gain the space and sensitivity for a more genuine and natural moral sense to emerge. For instance, we might decide to stop eating meat because we are aware of the karmic consequences for us in the future. Once we have been vegetarians for some time, we will become more sensitised and thereby recognise that a sheep or cow or pig is alive as one is oneself alive and will therefore feel empathy for them – and could not easily harm them, far less have them killed to eat. One could say that the karmic consequence of not eating meat for reasons of rational self-interest is that one develops real empathy for the living beings one formerly ate.

Ethics is really to do with feeling solidarity with all life, a direct recognition of the same life in the beings around one that one knows in oneself. This is essentially an imaginative act, something more than a kind of reasoned reflection – although of course thoughtful reflection may be a means of awakening that empathy. Imaginative empathy is direct and immediate, and may be completely intuitive, without thought, one might almost say, instinctive. One simply resonates with the life in another person or animal, just as a vase on a mantelpiece resonates sympathetically when a particular note is played on the piano.

For the sake of completeness we should acknowledge that even this is not the ultimate ethics. There is a path that leads from ethics as self-interested discipline on the basis of a recognition of the force of karma, to ethics as empathy based on the natural resonance of life for life, to ethics in its final sense as the spontaneous outpouring of compassion arising in the mind of one who has transcended selfclinging. The ethics of self-interested discipline leads, under the power of karma, to the development of a mind that naturally empathises more and more fully: the ethics of empathy overflows in selfless compassion, which is in a sense beyond ethics, for it requires no discipline or restraint, but acts spontaneously for the greatest benefit of all.

Sangharakshita says that, if we are to act ethically, we must rediscover this natural empathy for life that we had, at least in germinal form, in childhood (albeit then often accompanied by the tendency to act at times with great insensitivity). The metaphor of rediscovery implies that our effort is not one of willing something new into being, but of attending to our experience more closely to see what is already there. If we pay close attention we will find that we are already sensitive to the life around us. It is as if all the time life communicates directly with life at a level below our normal attention – like a background hum to which one has become accustomed and fails to notice any more. We are most likely to recognise this sensitivity, for instance, when immersed deep in a forest or jungle. If we are receptive to what is going on we may pick up what can be described as a vibration, a kind of emanation from the life in the midst of which we are plunged. To feel ourselves thus enfolded by the life around us can be a deeply soothing and refreshing experience.

The ethics of empathy is not limited to a response to animals or other living organisms. A fully empathic awareness responds to the living quality in all things, even in stones or metals, in storms and in stars. This is not a question of the pathetic fallacy – sentimentally attributing human characteristics to nature, though that would be far better than seeing it as mere dead matter. It becomes difficult to find language adequate to describe what one feels here, but we can sense something like life vibrating even in inorganic matter or natural events.²² If one has this kind of sensitivity it will affect the way one interacts with the world around one, making one cautious about destroying or even altering the environment unnecessarily. This empathic mindfulness perhaps needs far greater recognition and development. If one is not more deeply sensitive in this sense it will be less easy to have a natural ethical response to other humans – one's ethics will lack something of this deeper empathy. Of course it is very difficult to feel the life in nature when living in the midst of a great city, in which the natural world has been held at bay – albeit

overflowing with other humans. The whole trend of life today towards technologically mediated experience in the artificial environment of a city alienates us further and further from the natural world and therefore from our innate empathy with it.

Alienation from nature is counterbalanced in recent times by the growing movement of environmental awareness and action. The most common motivation here is the recognition that we are fouling our own nest and endangering thereby the lives of future generations. In other words rational self-interest is the motive: recognition of the vipāka of our own karma. But, there are those who are also motivated by a deeper sense of identity with the natural world we are endangering: theirs is the ethics of empathy. One of the possible beneficial outcomes of the environmental crisis, should we survive it, is a far more widely shared awareness of and sympathy with the life by which we are surrounded. Nature does not exist merely for man's enjoyment and he was not given 'dominion' over it to use it for his own benefit. The natural world is alive, full of life that resonates with our own lives and is valuable as life. The more widely that is experienced the more likely we are to see out the present century.

There is another way in which empathy with the natural world manifests itself: in the fascination of the sciences. For quite a number of people today the sciences are not so much about mere factual knowledge but about imagination. The wonder of nature's profusion and variety, the humbling vastness of space and time, all awaken in some a strong response that carries them beyond the narrowly personal. It is often remarked that many astronauts have returned from their extra-terrestrial journeys reporting a kind of religious experience on looking back at our planet floating amidst the stars.

On seeing how small and contingent is our little life one is awakened to a sense of the glorious mystery that surrounds us. That mystery can never finally be penetrated, but must be approached with awe and gratitude. Art and science here converge. We find ourselves in such different cultural circumstances to any that we know of in the past that it is difficult to say what form a re-sensitising to the natural world will take. As more and more Buddhists do recover a much deeper imaginative empathy, will they re-people trees and mountains as their ancestors did? Or will some new, as yet unimaginable, manner of embodying that sensitivity emerge? If Buddhism does truly take root again, imaginative empathy will necessarily deepen within the Sangha and perhaps more widely too. The rediscovery of this faculty will then certainly be expressed in a new Buddhist culture. Yet by definition we cannot know now what that will be like or even predict its direction, except to say that it must emerge. It will only do so,

however, on the basis of our own imaginative development now – our own rediscovery of the world around us as alive.

There are a few loose ends to be tied, linking the theme of imaginative empathy with other themes already well-discussed elsewhere. First, we can recognise the connection with metta or loving-kindness, which is the active dimension of empathy. When we feel that imaginative identity with living things we will wish them well and will want to act in ways that do not harm them and that are beneficial for them. This becomes more specific and runs deeper when two people are conscious of that natural empathy for each other, share various interests and values, and have the time and opportunity to get to know each other: they will become friends. That natural resonance of life for life will draw them together more and more closely.²³

Empathy is also the basis of compassion. When we become aware that others are suffering, our natural empathic response is to wish for that suffering to be removed and to feel the urge to do so ourselves. If we are genuinely imaginatively responsive we will not be able to ignore the distress around us and will do what we can to help. From this aspect of imagination flow all kinds of compassionate activity – activity that is integral to a genuine Buddhist life. Among other things this will mean working with others to create a better society, based on the principles of the Dharma.

Finally, a Sangha, such as is the Triratna Buddhist Order, rests upon that natural empathy. Empathy is its basis and the guarantee of its future. Imaginative empathy is a vibration of like with like and the more alike the more strong and subtle the empathy. Members of a Sangha are identified on many different levels: they are parts of a single reality; they share life itself; they have a common humanity; and they are committed in the same way to the same ideals – they Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. More completely still, they will be united to the extent that they have a direct experience of the Dharma working within them. The Sangha is only truly a Sangha when each member is aware of every other with that imaginative empathy in this fullest and deepest sense.

RESPONDING TO BEAUTY

'The great instrument of moral good is the imagination', says the Romantic poet, Shelley.²⁴ He goes on to argue that a function of art, and of poetry in particular, is to work upon and perfect that instrument, the imagination, so that it becomes capable of yet greater good. This connection between art and the moral and spiritual life has preoccupied Sangharakshita throughout his career. For a while it even threw up

something of a problem for him. After going forth as a wandering mendicant at the age of twenty-one, he experienced a conflict between art and spiritual life rather than a connection. It appeared to him that his dedication to poetry and his commitment to the Dharma were incompatible and that he must give up the one for the other. Resolution came slowly in his mid-twenties, especially through his experience leading tutorial classes in English literature for students from the Young Men's Buddhist Association that he had set up in Kalimpong, in North India. He found that, as he explained the significance of Shelley's *The Cloud*, he was explaining Dharma. It became clear that the greatest poetry touches the depths of human experience and there begins to meet the Buddha's teaching.

This recognition that Dharma and art have an important area of coincidence led him to write a number of essays, exploring '...the fact that Religion and Art are in essence one, and that Beauty is not merely Truth, but Goodness as well.'²⁵ The central work in this series is *The Religion of Art*, written in 1953 but unpublished for 20 years. For such a seminal piece it is still all too little known and studied. This is very regrettable because in it is set out what is perhaps one of the most important of Sangharakshita's contributions to the development of Buddhism in the world today, and especially in the West. For him, the creation and appreciation of art is fertile soil in which the Dharma may put down roots once more. This is because of the key position that art has held in the spiritual life of European civilisation.

While organised Christianity steadily controlled and even suppressed the free play of imagination in Western culture, an elevated imaginative life was sustained among educated people by the survival of the Platonic and Hermetic philosophies and by the evolution of an aesthetic tradition that explores spiritual possibilities beyond mere craft. Sangharakshita believes that it is especially the artists and art-lovers of Europe who kept alive some genuine sense of spiritual life and that Buddhism must recognise its affinity with that tradition if it is to live within the imagination of the West. It may also be that the resolution of the problems faced by Indian Buddhists in rediscovering a Buddhist imagination lies in the development of the aesthetic sensibility. The argument of *The Religion of Art* is simply stated, although the work contains some very penetrating exploration presented in a highly evocative style that cannot be summarised. Essentially Sangharakshita says that Religion (and by Religion he means religion in its essence: that is the Dharma) is concerned with developing egolessness and that that is the direction of the best in art.

Sangharakshita gives a very significant definition of art:

Art is the organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations that express the artist's sensibility and communicate to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives.

This definition is of course explored in depth in the essay, but it is worth unpacking a little to draw out the points that are important for present purposes. Art is creative activity that consists in organising the stuff of our sense-experience into new combinations that give pleasure. It is the pleasure we get when we experience artistic creations that makes them so compelling and it is a major factor in the effectiveness of art as a medium of spiritual growth.

The aesthetic hierarchy

Yet pleasurable sensations alone do not make art. We must distinguish in the first place between those pleasures that increase our ego-clinging and those that carry us at least some way beyond ourselves. Much of the pleasure that arises in our lives comes merely from gratifying our appetites – some might argue that the pleasures of sex and eating can perhaps be elevated to the truly aesthetic, but most commonly they are simply the relief of tension, whether of a simple and relatively innocent instinctive kind or of a more complex and perverse variety, as in the case of the pleasure that some might take in violence. In the Pali Canon the Buddha distinguishes between *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa vedanā*, usually translated as 'worldly' and 'unworldly' hedonic sensation. *Sāmisa* or worldly sensations are the pleasures, pains, and neutral feelings that arise from either the satisfaction, frustration, or lack of stimulation of desires that belong to the cyclic kind of conditionality (interestingly enough, defined sometimes in the Suttas as the 'vedanā of the householder'), while *nirāmisa* or unworldly hedonic sensations are those that arise in connection with the Path (spoken of as the 'vedanā of the renunciant').²⁶

Once mere appetite has been accounted for, what is left are pleasurable sensations that do have a positive emotional impact: not merely relieving tension but carrying us a little beyond ourselves, or at least rendering us more sympathetic to the life around us. We could refer to this dimension of experience as the aesthetic, reserving this term for the broadest range of imaginative response to what is pleasing to the senses beyond the relief of appetite. All that comes under this heading is not art, however, which deals in the higher reaches of aesthetic experience. Sangharakshita asserts an aesthetic hierarchy, distinguishing between the pretty, the lovely, and the beautiful. Prettiness is the delight of a suburban garden in full bloom – delighting but not transporting. Loveliness takes the breath away and arrests us for a while, as when perhaps we look down from a hill upon a

rolling vista. Emotionally refreshing as are such experiences, alone they have little lasting impact upon our overall values and direction in life.

Beauty shares with the pretty and the lovely the refined pleasures of the senses that open us up emotionally, but it conjoins with that pleasure moral value and spiritual meaning, not as something separate that is juxtaposed, but as an integral part of a single experience. Beauty, Truth, and Goodness really are apprehended as one. The beautiful object impresses itself upon us as touched by something beyond us, in the sense of beyond our self-attachment. It hints at possibilities of understanding in which utility plays no part and quantity cannot be applied, confounding our measuring, reasoning, bargaining minds. The beautiful brings us into contact with the ultimate mystery of things and we sense the deepest forces that shape existence, the upward momentum within all things. That contact presents us with a strong implicit challenge to live a different and better life. The best in art, arguably what is truly art, always contains this challenge.

Art then is concerned with beauty, in this sense, rather than the pretty or even the lovely: the true artist is always seeking the elusive mystery of the beautiful that hovers just beyond the pen's point or the brush's tip. In that quest for the beautiful are created works that delight the senses and communicate values that lie at the heart of things, impelling us to change our lives. This union in the beautiful of sensuous delight with meaning and value is beyond concepts, although concepts may help us to appreciate it. Once more we are in the territory of imagination: true art speaks directly to the imagination. We may feel the impact of the work without ever translating it into words. Such art is created out of the combination of the artist's skill in his or her chosen medium with their uplifted imagination – with their sensibility. That imagination or sensibility will be communicated directly to the imagination of those who encounter such work, so they share its creator's values.

The great importance of art, then, from the point of view of the Dharma, is that it appeals to the imagination, which is, as we have seen, the vehicle of spiritual growth and ultimately of realisation. Art not only appeals to the imagination, it educates and refines it. By appreciating the aesthetic, even in the form of the pretty, but especially as the beautiful, our imaginations are exercised and stretched. True art teaches us to apprehend modes of experience previously inaccessible to us. It may even allow us a glimpse of the ultimate beauty that is the content of Bodhi – the beauty that perfectly blends the highest aesthetic satisfaction with the deepest penetration of truth and the most complete and active feeling for all life.

A word of caution should be introduced here: art itself is not enough. It seems that one may be able to appreciate even the most challenging art simply as pleasurable experience: one may experience its loveliness without being touched by its beauty. In this connection, Sangharakshita recalls the experience of the American Zen Roshi, Philip Kapleau. At the end of the Second World War, Kapleau Roshi was present at the war crimes trials of some of the leading Nazi and was deeply struck that several of these men were highly cultured with a strong appreciation of art, and especially of music. Yet they were capable of the most terrible inhumanity. They were able to spend their days ordering, even supervising, mass extermination and then to retire for the evening to listen to Beethoven. Although art is a means of exercising the imagination it is, generally speaking, not enough by itself for the successful following of the Path, even for simple morality. Without clarity of view and conscious Dharma practice, especially in the form of ethics, art easily becomes an indulgence or a delusion. Art needs the Dharma, just as the Dharma needs art if it is truly to take root in the contemporary world.²⁷

Developing the aesthetic imagination

In *The Religion of Art* Sangharakshita argues strongly for the Buddhist practitioner to apply him or herself actively to the aesthetic life. Indeed, surely if one is not developing a more and more refined response to the aesthetic quality of things, and especially to what genuinely expresses beauty, one is unlikely to be developing one's imagination, the vehicle of the Dharma life. We have already seen Sangharakshita assert that a universe that is not alive is not one in which Enlightenment is possible. We could equally say that a mind that is not capable of responding to the beautiful is not one that can gain Enlightenment. Aesthetic development then should be a keynote of contemporary Buddhism. The Sangha should be characterised by a very active aesthetic culture. Sangha members should be creating as much beauty around them as they can and actively seeking it out in their own cultures.

Sangharakshita says that the first thing anyone trying to develop their aesthetic imagination needs to do is to stop engaging with what is unaesthetic. It is necessary to develop some discrimination about what one takes in for, just as what is aesthetically pleasing has a positive effect on the mind, what is ugly or crude affects it negatively. We may, however, not be aware enough to notice what the effect is and we may, out of simple ignorance, surround ourselves with what blunts and distorts our imaginations. From this point of view the Dharma is completely against the cultural relativism that is so widely considered ideologically normative. Art is not simply whatever people like. There is a hierarchy of

beauty and art can be distinguished from what is not art – even if it may not always be easy to reach agreement about the boundary between them.

The issue is made more difficult in the context of religion. Much of what passes for religious art is certainly not art – and will therefore not even be religious in any meaningful sense. Sangharakshita distinguishes four categories in connection with religion and art – religion here meaning that which is concerned with selftranscendence, not mere conventional religiosity. There is art that is religious in form but that is not essentially religious: tasteless statues of the Virgin Mary or luridly coloured prints of Ganesh depict 'religious' themes but express no genuine religious sentiment and aesthetic quality. Second, there is art that is neither religious in form nor in essence: much of popular culture is of this kind, as is perhaps a high proportion of the art on sale in commercial galleries. Thirdly, there is art that is religious in essence but not in form: 'Chinese landscape painting, the best of Shelley's poetry, and much of the music of Beethoven', says Sangharakshita, to which one might add, for the sake of keeping up with the evolution of artistic form, the pick of Tarkovsky's films. Finally there is art that is religious both in essence and in form: the best images of the Buddha being the supreme examples.

At the same time as developing some aesthetic discrimination and consciously withdrawing, where that is possible, from what is ugly or life-denying, one can begin actively to cultivate the aesthetic imagination. It is important here to remember that though not all that appeals is art or even genuinely aesthetic, an aesthetic response is not artificial: the imagination is natural, not constructed. One is learning to discover a faculty that one naturally has, not to add something to oneself. This is a delicate matter, because one is discovering something within oneself that is hidden from oneself, and one often requires help to bring it fully into the light of day.

One often requires aesthetic kalyāṇa mitratā, 'spiritual friendship', or mentoring, whether from living people or educative literature or even works of art – and it is no coincidence that the Pali and Sanskrit word kalyāṇa has the primary meaning of 'beautiful', and an extended meaning of morally good: the kalyāṇa mitra, or 'spiritual friend', is one who embodies to some extent and communicates to one what is truly beautiful and good – he or she is one's moral and aesthetic mentor. But, those who are aesthetically immature easily acquire tastes that are not their own: to begin with, one may like what one believes one is 'supposed' to like – in the early days of the FWBO (now the Triratna Buddhist Community) many of us followed Sangharakshita's artistic inclinations, for instance for the Pre-Raphaelites, without truly having an independent appreciation of them. This aesthetic apprenticeship, for all its naivety, should not be

disparaged, for it is often an inevitable first step in discovering one's own natural imaginative response to art.

A successful contemporary Buddhist movement will be alive with *kalyāṇa mitratā* in this aesthetic sense. The environment will be as pleasing as possible, full of objects and images that express the values of the Dharma, whether formally or not. The teaching will be communicated with as much evocation of beauty as of truth and goodness – not merely by way of a formulaic image. There will be a culture of engagement with art, both of the particular place and time and of the aesthetic traditions of the entire world. Those who have developed their aesthetic imaginations to any degree will share their appreciation with others, helping them to discover the rich world of beauty within the great art of all humanity. There will be an atmosphere of aesthetic criticism, in the best sense – the critic as aesthetic educator, sharing his or her aesthetic responses so that others may discover their own. One could even say that a Dharma centre should be as much a centre of the arts as of meditation or doctrine, where people are learning to discover and uplift their aesthetic imaginations. Sangharakshita has long encouraged the development of arts centres in association with Dharma centres of the Triratna Buddhist Community. For a while in the early 1980's there was an especially successful such arts centre in Croydon.²⁸ It was a notable achievement and there have been but a few other such environments since. One of the functions of such centres has been to bring contemporary artists and writers in many fields together with Buddhists, so that the artists may discover the kinship of their work with the Dharma life and Buddhists may be enriched by the creative work of men and women from their own cultures.

Along with offering an aesthetically pleasing environment and education in the appreciation of art, an effective Sangha will encourage creative endeavour on the part of its members. Even though most people's gifts will not be great, their efforts to paint, write poetry, or sing will stretch their imaginations and open them up to the rich dimension of aesthetic experience. Whilst it is important to distinguish what is truly art from what is not, there should be no snobbishness about the effort to create, despite what will often be its limited quality.

This requires a delicate balance of understanding, for the issue has become complex in recent decades – contemporary egalitarianism tends to abhor all distinction of excellence and all hierarchy of value. A major reason for this is that art has historically been mixed up with class hierarchy or racial and colonial exploitation. But social hierarchy and moral and aesthetic hierarchies have no necessary connection. It is possible to say that one human is morally better than another or that one

artist is greater than another quite independent of which class, race, or caste he or she belongs to.

It is important to stress, nonetheless, that the acceptance of a hierarchy of value should imply no contempt for what is at the bottom of the scale. What is to be appreciated is the extent to which any work demonstrates imagination struggling to realise and communicate itself. Imagination is naturally transcending and in any genuinely imaginative work, no matter its lack of subtlety or success, there will be a hint of something rising beyond the skill and understanding of the creator. Even works that are not very refined can communicate deeper values. Many of us have come to the Dharma to some extent inspired by forces within popular culture that express that genuine creativity. Much of the early generation of Sangharakshita's Western disciples, for instance, discovered their first stirrings of spiritual aspiration in the music of Bob Dylan and the like.

The greater mandala of uselessness

This cultivation of the aesthetic at all levels will, then, characterise the life of any serious Buddhist as an integral part of their Dharma practice, for aesthetic appreciation is a key dimension of mindfulness. Sangharakshita points out that true awareness is not merely discernment of the characteristics of an object, especially for their utility, but appreciation of it: 'It's a sort of relishing it – a being in tune with it, being on the same wavelength as it, being in harmony with it even, you could say: not just knowing it'.²⁹ Awareness in this sense is appreciative and non-utilitarian. Indeed, he uses H. V. Guenther's translation of the Sanskrit word, *vidyā*, usually taken to mean 'knowledge', as 'aesthetic appreciation' to make an important point about the Dharma. *Prajñā* itself is seeing everything all the time in this aesthetically appreciative way, which is of course also full of love or *maitrī*.

The Dharma life is then a life in which one is not trying to achieve anything in a purely worldly sense. Beyond the immediate purposes of survival and practice, one does not value the objects of experience for their utility. Whatever one does for those practical purposes is contained within a larger context of aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment – what Sangharakshita has referred to as the 'Greater Mandala of Aesthetic Appreciation' or, more provocatively, the 'Greater Mandala of Uselessness' within which one's useful activities are contained. The Dharma life is essentially play. It is the aesthetic dimension that transforms the Dharma life into pure play. Aesthetic creation, the 'organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations', is essentially play, 'purposiveness without purpose'.³⁰ Art has its roots in the casual knocking

of a poker against a log in the fire to watch the sparks fly, the skimming of a stone across a pond for the relish of the spreading ripples, the crying out of a descant of mere sounds for the pleasure of an echo, or the making of marks on paper for the delight of the pen's flow. Rearranging one's room, planting a bed of flowers, even choosing new clothes, all may be small steps into the aesthetic realm, without which life is merely a dull struggle for survival. Ultimately it is only in this aesthetic dimension – or in the dimension of imagination, to put even the aesthetic in context – that life's meaning and value is to be found. Without this dimension life is truly not worth living.

The Dharma life is this aesthetic play lived out in a context of recognition of the truth of things and of deep empathy with the life in all. This is the Bodhisattva's *līlā*, play or sport – playful activity that spontaneously helps all beings to awaken to the ultimate beauty of existence. This aesthetic dimension is not only represented in appreciation of the arts and artistic creativity, but in meditation and in other aspects of practice such as ethics or devotion. When the Dharma life is lived for its own sake alone then it is truly the Dharma life.

IMAGINING THE BUDDHA

Imagination is the faculty within us that naturally empathises with the life all around us and that responds spontaneously to the aesthetic quality of things. Yet such responsiveness is not in itself enough.

An imaginative empathy that resonates with the life in all things is indeed wonderful, and a goal most of us have yet to achieve. Yet once achieved it can all too easily be lost and one may tumble back into isolation, even alienation: in classical Buddhist terms, one may fall from the highest god realms into the deepest hells. This is because within even the most intense empathy there lingers a trace of selfishness that divides one finally from what is other. One's empathic resonance with the other is predicated on one's own self-clinging: one recognises in them the same life one cherishes in oneself and therefore cannot wish them harm. That quiver of selfattachment must be seen through and abandoned if the boundless compassion of the Buddha, manifesting in accordance with Dharma *niyāma* processes, is to be released. The ethics of empathy must be transcended in the entirely selfless ethics of Enlightenment.

Similarly, an imaginative response to aesthetic qualities is not enough. It is not enough to enjoy the pretty and the lovely wherever they are to be found, enriching and elevating though they may be. In the first place this is because the capacity for aesthetic appreciation is not self-sustaining. Until Stream Entry is attained, it is karmically based: it is the result, the *vipāka*,

of previous effort and will only endure while one is investing sufficient skilful activity to feed it. But even more significantly, aesthetic experience cannot be had unalloyed. Life sooner or later contains both pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness.

The problem of the unavoidability of ugliness is even more pronounced if one is living mainly for aesthetic pleasures. Such a life will sooner or later be a tragic one: reality always contains what is ugly and imperfect; the worm always gnaws within the loveliest rose. In the traditional list of viparyāsas, aśubha, 'ugliness' or 'repulsiveness', is added to the three lakṣaṇas of anitya, anatman, and duḥkha, as omnipresent characteristics of mundane existence that we turn upside down in our habitual misinterpretation of our experience, assuming that we can find permanence, substantial reality, abiding happiness, and a perfectly satisfying combination of life-factors. To avoid encountering the aśubha one will be compelled to erect a 'Palace of Art', as in Tennyson's poem, in which everything unpleasant is kept at bay, like the gated compounds of the super-rich – or the palaces in which the young Gautama was legendarily beguiled. Eventually the ugly and unpleasant must break through and one's heaven will be transformed into a hell. One must therefore seek not merely the pretty and the lovely but the beautiful, shining with an unearthly light, reflected from a dimension beyond our self-clinging.

The transcendental object

For these reasons neither empathy nor aesthetics are enough and can only be aspects of Buddhism, not the whole. The Dharma is not concerned merely with temporarily maximising happiness within this existence. Its aim is the complete transcendence of all suffering through a direct experience of the way things really are. Empathy and responsiveness to the aesthetically pleasing are nonetheless vitally important for the Dharma life, because their exercise stretches and refines imagination, preparing it for the ultimate truth of things. But an indefinite development of empathy or refinement of sensibility alone does not necessarily lead to Bodhi. There must be an intervention from beyond one's conscious identity. One needs to direct oneself towards and to encounter what Sangharakṣita calls a 'transcendental object'.

If one is to orient oneself towards and open up to one's ultimate aim it must take a vivid embodiment somewhere within one's experience. If that transcendental object does not intervene one remains locked within the walls one's own, at best, highly refined self-attachment – and that refinement will not, in the long run, be self-sustaining: it depends all the

time upon renewed karma. If one is to free oneself finally from the agonies and turbulence of the Wheel of Life, conditioned processes of the karma niyāma must give way to irreversible Dharma niyāma processes. We need to give ourselves up to that transcendental object.

The transcendental object is encountered not as something we have created but as something that is greater than us and independent of us, reaching down to us. Our imaginations ascend: the image descends. But what is the transcendental object? Here we enter great mysteries. Our ordinary minds cannot comprehend what lies beyond them: we cannot see it with our fleshly eyes or reason it with our routine concepts – even our feelings reduce it to the sentimental circumference of our personal histories. Only the imagination can reach up towards that transcendental object and invite its guiding and transforming presence into our lives. Our imaginations can be illumined by a light that shines from beyond us.

This is strange territory for those of us who are post-Christians – or post-Hindus or former devotees of any other theistic brand. We begin to sense the sinister presence of GOD – and many of us will recoil with loathing and contempt. But perhaps we need bolder hearts and clearer minds. The problem with God is that an imaginative experience has been taken too literally in the context of inadequate understanding of the nature of things – of wrong view. The experience that some describe as God may be a genuine one. Something that appears as greater than oneself may have irrupted into one's imagination. The problem of God is not the experience itself but the way we think about it and our relation to it, as well as the theological and ecclesiastical machinery with which the idea becomes surrounded.

The Buddhist need not deny the experience but will subject it first to analysis in terms of *pratītya-samutpāda* – nothing can exist eternally, whether within us or without us: all is change, all is without substance. Then we can approach the raw experience on its own terms, considering it the object of the imagination, perhaps even of the illumined imagination, beyond all conceptual designation. As Buddhists we simply do not use that language of God because it is unhelpful and easily becomes the justification of much evil.³¹

The illumined image

The transcendental object is experienced by the imagination. In other words it is an image, in the broadest sense. But it is an image that carries the mystery of Enlightenment to us so that we may contemplate it and finally realise it. It is, in Sangharakshita's phrase, an 'illumined image'. Into our purified and uplifted imaginations there descends, apparently under its

own power, an image illumined from beyond, that in its turn illumines our imaginations.

What then is the illumined imagination? In the field of ethics it is empathy without any trace of self-attachment – the compassion of the Bodhisattva. In art it is sensitivity to the beautiful, in the highest sense, in an artistic creation – and ultimately to the beauty that lies in all things, truly considered.³² Illumined imagination is a pure responsiveness, without any trace of self-clinging. This is quite beyond our usual mode of experience, which is underlain by a deep and largely unconscious selforientation: everything is finally weighed by the compelling measure of self. Even one's exalted moods of empathy and of creative appreciation are tinged with subjectivity. Illumined imagination breaks through the confining circle of self and resonates with the deepest chords of life. In terms of *pratītya-samutpāda*, one senses directly the progressive order of conditionality that runs through all things and that finds its fullest and freest manifestation in Dharma *niyāma* processes. One feels the very pulse of life.

When the imagination is finally and completely illumined it perceives everywhere the illumined image: everything is known as it truly is, and is loved with unbounded compassion, free from all sentiment.³³ However, in order to realise that ultimate exaltation of imagination, we require a ladder to lift ourselves up, rungs and handholds within our grasp that raise us above our present standpoint. We require specific images that are accessible to us within our own imaginations yet that are illumined from beyond our self-clinging. We require imaginative intermediaries that we can contemplate with the whole force of our uplifted imaginations and that will then connect us with the light of Bodhi. This is what we are doing when we embark upon the fourth stage of Sangharakshita's System of Meditation: the Stage of Spiritual Rebirth. We are feeding our imaginations with illumined images that have a special correspondence with Bodhi, inviting the light that shines in them to shine on us, transforming us so that we too are illumined. Most characteristically the images that are contemplated are archetypal visions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Contemplating the Buddha

Why is the most characteristic image for contemplation in Buddhism a figure of a Buddha? In principle any image can be illumined – in the Ch'an and Zen traditions it is said that Mahakashyapa gained Enlightenment when he saw the Buddha hold up a golden flower. One could say that illumination is in the eye of the perceiver, not in the object – although that

perhaps reduces the whole matter to a two-dimensional logic that imagination defies. However, some images will be more generally effective – and particular ones will appeal to different individuals.

Sangharakshita has spoken of this as a matter of correspondence in the Hermetic, magico-symbolic sense: something on one level of meaning in some mysterious way invokes something on another – perhaps the most universal experience of this kind is the 'sacred' atmosphere picked up in some places, for instance, some Gothic cathedrals or ancient tumuli. Particular forms and situations allow far easier access to the realm of imagination. This is sometimes referred to in Celtic culture as 'thinness': a place is 'thin' in the sense that the veil that separates this world from the other world of gods and spirits is more easily passed through in that location.³⁴ In the same way, some images are more readily aligned with Bodhi. Which images correspond most closely with Bodhi will have some universal basis, but the precise lineaments of their appearance will be determined by particular culture, character, and psychology – and even simply by circumstance.

The illumined image is at the intersection of two movements: one going upward from the gathered imaginative powers of the particular individual and the other experienced as coming downward from a dimension beyond the individual. Both the ascending and the descending currents must be present for the image to be illumined. It must present itself in a form we can recognise within our sensory and visionary experience, but it will carry a meaning beyond our normal understanding. The figure of the Buddha is the image that most generally unifies both the ascending imaginative fascination of the Dharma practitioner and the descending force of illumination. There are a number of reasons why the figure of the Buddha is the image most easily illumined. Let us start with the most obvious: it was the historical Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, who gained Enlightenment and taught the Dharma as the Path that leads to it. We can therefore understand who he was from an historical point of view: a human being like us with a human experience like ours. But we also know that he entered upon an experience that passes our present understanding. As human being we can know him; as illumined we cannot, at least not fully, not yet. The confluence in a single image of what we can know with the Bodhi that we can only intuit blends the upward and downward currents that engender illumination.

The image of the Buddha is not only a representation of his realisation, but of his teaching, which was a communication of the content of his Bodhi. As much as anything, his teaching tells us what the Dharma is not. It teaches that there are no eternal essences but that this does not reduce everything to mere matter or leave us with a nihilistic denial of value and

meaning. He taught a Middle Way between these two extremes: there is a flow of conditioned processes, which may either simply circle endlessly round or may rise up without limit to ever new levels of conscious manifestation. Following that augmentative, spiral-like flow of conditions is the Path taught by the Buddha that leads to his Enlightenment – and, we might say, beyond. When we contemplate the image of the Buddha as the embodiment of his Dharma we are conscious therefore of what he is not: he is not an eternal god, far less the creator of the universe or cosmic judge, but he is not a mere human being, bounded by a single lifespan. He hovers beyond our conceptual comprehension, an expression of the mystery of the Middle Way. In the words of the *Manjuśrī Stuti Sādhana* that Sangharakshita received from Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, we see the Bodhisattva's image as appearing while we “thus 'integrate', in the *māyā* way that does not prevent the causally-originated semblances, though it transcends the constructions, 'all things', and 'I', 'the skandhas' and consciousness”. When we see the image of the Buddha and are aware of what he taught historically, we recognise that we must lay aside our conceptual grasping onto either existence or non-existence. That enables us to enter the pure space of imagination in which all is directly recognised as 'void yet appearing; appearing yet void'.

One could say that the core conceptual teachings of the Buddha are gateways to direct imaginative experience and his own figure unmistakably embodies those entry points. The image of the Buddha is therefore the central image in Buddhism: the image that is most likely to be transformed into an illumined image because it invokes our wonder and reverence without limit yet is least likely to be taken literally as an eternal substance.

There is more yet to the significance of the Buddha image: it helps us to avoid thinking of what transcends the human as impersonal. Sangharakshita points out that, when we think of something as impersonal, we think of it as less than a person – as sub-personal rather than supra-personal – essentially as dead.³⁵ He therefore argues that it is best to think of and represent the supra-personal dimension with a person. What is represented is a human being, albeit often in idealised form. Yet what is symbolised is something beyond the merely human: a dimension of experience that quite transcends ordinary humanity – and is certainly not impersonal. For these and other reasons the image of the Buddha is the central symbol of the Buddhist tradition, although not the only one. It is the central image because it is the one that best and most unequivocally invokes, in various ways, what Buddhists understand to be the nature of his experience. By contemplating that image the practitioner's imagination may most easily be absorbed, refined, and finally illumined.

Images of Enlightenment in Buddhist History

But, many Buddhists today focus on figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that are not understood to represent the human historical Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, in any sense at all. This has come about under particular conditions. It is worth giving Sangharakshita's impression of the tradition's unfolding history, in this respect, albeit one that must be highly interpretative, since there is much that is still very obscure about Buddhism's Indian past. His perspective on that history is a key to how he would like to see practice in the Triratna Buddhist Community develop.

Even for the Buddha himself there seems to have been a transcendental object. In the *Gāraṇa Sutta* he is presented, in the days immediately after his Enlightenment at Bodhgaya, as recognising the need to revere and rely upon something, for one 'dwells in suffering' without it. No living person could fill that place for him, since he was supreme in ethics, meditation, and wisdom: he could only revere and rely upon the Dharma. But clearly here the Dharma means something more than the body of teachings, even something more than a principle.³⁶ What exactly it does mean is precisely the mystery that only imagination can enter.

The Buddha revered the Dharma, but his disciples, including his Enlightened disciples, revered him.³⁷ They revered him, of course, out of their deep gratitude to him for showing them the way to *nirvāṇa*, but he also embodied for them that something greater than themselves that was the content of Enlightenment. It seems that in the early tradition this was as far as it was felt necessary to go and the Buddha himself remained the sole object of reverence for some centuries. To think of the Buddha was to gain an imaginative connection with his Bodhi. That was enough. For the earliest Buddhists the historical Buddha seems to have remained a powerful imaginative presence that it was even unnecessary to depict figuratively. Various symbols were used to represent each main phase in his life iconographically: footprints for his birth, a tree for his Enlightenment, a wheel for his first teaching, and a stupa for his Parinirvāṇa. As the centuries rolled on, the figure of the Buddha came to be represented in various forms and these images were the focus for worship, treated as if they were the Buddha himself, present with his followers. Inevitably these representations became less and less naturalistic, more idealised.

In the later development now known as the Mahayana, new Buddha forms arose that were not at all identified with the historical Shakyamuni or his life. These Buddhas were considered to be Enlightened in the same way that Shakyamuni was Enlightened, but independent of him, perhaps coming from completely different world-systems. Similarly Bodhisattvas

emerged: beings who were on the way to Enlightenment in the same way as the Buddha-to-be of the Jātakas had been, but again independent of his own mythic history.

To contain this development, the doctrine of the Trikāya or 'Three Bodies' developed as an explanatory framework: the *nirmāṇakāya* represented the level of historical fact, the Buddha's actual existence on this planet as an ordinary human being and his awakening to Bodhi from the human state; the *samboghakāya* is Enlightenment as we see it with the eye of illumined imagination, appearing in the form of archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; the *Dharmakāya* is the essence of the Buddha's Bodhi, beyond all possible representation, by virtue of which the other kāyas are bodies of the Buddha – illumined images.

A final phase in the history of Buddhism, the Tantra, saw the proliferation of images, under the influence of Indian magic and later Tibetan and Far Eastern shamanism. A rich pantheon of figures of fascinating and bewildering variety danced from the imaginations of the Tantric siddhas and became a required aspect of Vajrayana practice, invoked to this day. Some such figures were presented as terrifying wrathful demons and others had animal heads or bodies – yet many of these were considered to be Buddhas or Bodhisattvas.

How we view this history influences how we today, especially in the Triratna Buddhist Community, are to approach traditional imagery and how we are to imagine the Buddha ourselves. Sangharakshita considers that the historical Buddha is the touchstone of the whole tradition, whether as regards doctrine or imagery. In the case of the teachings the touchstone is the Buddha's words as found in the earliest Suttas. Whatever doctrines evolved later, such as the Trikaya, should be tested against the basic teachings found in the early records, especially, although not solely, in the Pali Canon³⁸ But this implies no fundamentalism. The tradition should not be considered closed and later developments may be very useful, indeed may embody oral records of the Buddha's teachings not set down in the early canons. There are important doctrinal developments in Mahayana Sutras and commentaries that are fully compatible with basic teachings and that help to clarify and deepen understanding – so long as they are approached in the context of the basic teachings and are faithful to its essential methodology.³⁹

In a similar way, Sangharakshita considers that the image of the Buddha is the touchstone of all later developments in imagery. The wealth of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that emerged in the Mahayana should all be understood as the unfolding imaginative exploration and experience of the nature of the Buddha's Bodhi – the inner content of the Dharma that was

the object of the Buddha's reverence upon which he himself relied. In this respect the Mahayana fulfilled a very important need, since the early tradition does not seem, to any great degree, to have developed devotional and imaginative approaches to understanding and connecting with Enlightenment, perhaps finding the Buddha himself sufficient embodiment of the goal. But, as the historical Buddha became a more distant figure, new ways of imagining Bodhi arose quite naturally, giving imaginative depth and power to the concepts through which the Dharma was communicated.

Gradually there emerged a very appealing imaginative world, with its own poetic philosophy, such as the theory of the trikāya, that expressed the nature of that world in positive terms without violating the principles of pratītya-samutpāda – it was a philosophy of 'as if' writ large. Sangharakshita sees these three kāyas as representing levels of connection, even communication, with Bodhi, offering a kind of theoretical structure for understanding the images through which it was presented. With one's ordinary mind and ordinary senses one can know the Buddha, or at least know of him, as nirmāṇakāya. With one's illumined imagination one can perceive the deeper nature of his Enlightenment as sambhogakāya, in the various archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. With fully realised Wisdom one directly knows, even oneself embodies, the Dharmakāya, that dimension the realisation of which has transformed the historical Gautama into the Buddha, and that enters into and illumines our own uplifted imaginations.

Sangharakshita believes, however, that there has been a tendency for later developments to lose their connection with the earlier and for some schools to emphasise other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at the expense of Shakyamuni. Besides neglecting our overwhelming debt to him, this makes it easy to lose sight of what he taught. Some schools today rely almost entirely on late doctrinal developments, not anchored in the teachings from which they originate. This has left much that is questionably Buddhist, in spirit if not in letter. He considers that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who emerged later should be viewed as expressions of Shakyamuni's Bodhi, exploring in imaginative terms, the only ones available to us once we have reached the limits of concepts, what that Enlightenment really means. In a sense they all are Shakyamuni Buddha. In order to give this iconographic expression he has asked one of his artist disciples to depict the historical Buddha surrounded by an aura within which can be discerned all the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas emerging and re-merging.

To sum up so far: the early tradition is the doctrinal and imaginative touchstone for what developed in later centuries. The Mahayana explores

doctrine and image far more fully than the Buddha and his immediate disciples did, but whatever emerged in that exploration must be tested against the Buddha's image and his own words, so far as we can know them – and much must be discarded, especially in the doctrinal field. Essentially those images are to be understood in terms of the historical Buddha's own experience. But what of the profusion of the Vajrayana? Of course much that goes under the heading of Vajrayana is simply Mahayana and can be submitted to the test of its conformity with the early tradition. However, Sangharakshita is wary of the more specifically Tantric developments. He considers that much Tantric imagery, especially its demonic forms, does not 'feel' like Buddhism, however much primal appeal it may have.

This raises an important issue: a powerful image is not necessarily an illumined one. An image may touch on very deep themes in life and communicate powerful universal forces that impart a strong psychic charge. This does not, however, by any means signify that it is an illumined image – or readily capable of being illumined, except in the sense that ultimately all images may be illumined. The fact that an image appeals very strongly or that it appears very powerfully in dreams or visions does not necessarily mean that it is a suitable one for contemplation in the hope of it becoming illumined.⁴⁰

Finding illumined images

Let us sum up the discussion of imagining the Buddha so far. For the imagination to be illumined we need to feed it illumined images – or images that easily carry illumination. The image readiest to hand and least ambiguous in this respect is the image of the Buddha, albeit in idealised and enriched form, presenting itself in the language of exalted and intensified imagination. This process of enrichment and idealisation is found in Buddhist tradition especially in the Mahayana.

Where then does that leave the Buddhist today? Are we to draw on the Mahayana for our illuminable images? This is largely what the FWBO/Triratna Buddhist Community has done since its inauguration. At their ordination within the Order Sangharakshita initiated each of his disciples into a visualisation practice or *sādhana*, by ritually repeating a mantra. At first the forms of meditation on those images were those he himself had been initiated into by gurus in the Tibetan tradition – or were based upon them. That procedure has broadly continued to the present, with his own disciples initiating their disciples into a range of practices coming directly or indirectly from Tibetan sources. Those being ordained have till now been introduced to the way of visualising a particular

Buddha or Bodhisattva in terms of specific colours, gestures, and accoutrements in the context of a fixed 'drama' of unfolding appearance and connection. The appearance is accompanied by the recitation of mantras and verses drawn from the Indo-Tibetan Mahayana tradition.

Sangharakshita has for some time made it clear that he does not see these practices as belonging within the Tibetan tradition and he has very specifically rejected the ritual context and doctrinal elaboration within which that tradition has embedded them. Over the years there have been various phases of revising and revisioning the practices available to Order members. Nonetheless they have continued to hover in an uneasy space, part of yet not part of Tibetan Buddhism. As in so many areas, Sangharakshita himself, with the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community following sometimes testily in his wake, has made a slow journey from forms and doctrines taken from extant Buddhist schools to something more essentially Buddhist, worked out in our own situation from fundamental principles derived from the Buddha himself. This has at times been confusing for his disciples, who have generally a less sharp eye for principles than he himself has. We are often left clinging to forms he introduced us to, while he himself has cut deeper to the heart of the matter. The area of imaginative exploration here under discussion is one in which he wishes us much more decisively to leave behind the forms and thoughts of later tradition – in this case especially of Tibetan Buddhism. He says that though he himself did take initiation and teaching from great Tibetan teachers, he did so not because they were specifically from the Tibetan tradition, to which he never felt any special attraction. He sat at their feet because they were individuals who made a powerful spiritual impact upon him and he has always seen the teachings and practices they gave him in the light of the Buddha's own essential message, rather than of this or that particular school.

In respect of these practices, Sangharakshita wants his disciples to break much more decisively with Tibetan tradition – without of course belittling or devaluing it for those for whom it is culturally appropriate. In the first place, it is clear that many members of the Order do not get on well with this form of practice, important as it might have seemed to them at ordination because of the powerful ritual context in which they received it. Many have simply stopped doing the *sādhana* they were given and have concentrated on more basic practices. Some others have taken the context from which the practices are apparently derived as the one in which they are practising and have looked to Tibetan Buddhist sources for specific guidance. For a small minority it seems that the Order is experienced as more or less an extension of the Tibetan tradition, especially of the

Nyingma school. This of course leads to divergences of view and practice that threaten the future unity of the community.

But the main issue is the missed opportunity. In trying to follow late developments in Buddhist tradition we cut ourselves off increasingly from the Buddha and from the opportunity to find him in our own imaginations that have been formed within our contemporary cultures. For most this will mean that, though apparently faithful Buddhists, their real faith will remain in the material world, for without an imaginative world beyond this one, there is no other. They will not be able to bring imaginative depth to their own Dharma lives and they will not be able to contribute to the creation of a new Buddhist culture in the heart of the cultures around us, thereby opening up a route into the Dharma for many, many others in the future. Buddhism will continue to inhabit a world from which God has been abstracted and no more effective image has taken his place to give experience its ultimate depth. It will veritably have become 'European Buddhism', the 'passive nihilism' that Nietzsche so feared as the twilight of Western civilisation.⁴¹

What Sangharakshita believes we must do is to take inspiration from the process the tradition went through, not its products. We have seen that, after the Buddha's Parinirvāṇa, his disciples felt a continuing imaginative connection with him and with the experience he had realised. As the centuries went by this evolved into a wealth of figures and forms that expressed the inner nature of Enlightenment. The worship and contemplation of these forms, in the context of other practices, was for many a way of realising the Dharma. For them Buddhahood was a real presence in their lives and they learnt directly from that source, long after Shakyamuni had ceased to live on this Earth.

This process has to take place again in our own circumstances, so radically different in kind. We must go back to the historical Buddha and allow his Enlightenment to express itself afresh in our own imaginations. Some of us may be inspired by forms that have already appeared - but perhaps we should be careful not to allow them to be a short cut, thereby failing to discover what the Buddha and his Bodhi look like in this modern world. We need to re-imagine the Buddha or to discover him again within our own imaginations.

Buddhists must set out on a journey to reawaken the imagination so that the Buddha may arise. Imagination needs therefore to be engaged, fed, and expressed at every stage of involvement with the Dharma – which means at every stage of involvement with the Sangha. This can be looked at in terms of what Sangharakshita considers the unifying theme of Buddhism: Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. He sees

Going for Refuge as the act that characterises all aspects of the Dharma life and that embodies doctrine in action.⁴² It takes place repeatedly on deeper and deeper levels until Enlightenment is reached. He distinguishes five levels of Going for Refuge.

At first, especially in traditional 'Buddhist' cultures, Going for Refuge is 'cultural', insofar as one identifies oneself as a Buddhist because that is one's ancestral culture. When one begins to practise the Dharma to any extent one's Going for Refuge becomes 'provisional', insofar as one does actually try to put the Buddha's teaching into practice at least while the inspiration lasts or the class or retreat is in progress. These are preliminary but very important stages.

The most critical stage is where Going for Refuge becomes 'effective'. One has a sufficiently strong experience of the Dharma to be able to dedicate one's life to it and to put its practice into effect. At this stage one dedicates oneself to acting in accordance with karma niyāma processes that will lead one to see directly for oneself that there are no fixed essences within or without. At that point one's Going for Refuge becomes 'real', because Dharma niyāma processes begin to unfold within one and one's Going for Refuge is spontaneous and irreversible. Absolute Going for Refuge is the point at which one becomes oneself the Refuge.

One Goes for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. But, historically speaking, the Buddha is the most significant of the three insofar as the other two emerge from his experience of Enlightenment: he rediscovered and made the Dharma known in this era and he formed the Sangha. The Buddha stands in the whole schema of Going for Refuge for the ultimate objective and content of the Dharma life. That life is lived to become like the Buddha and to see what he sees. The levels of Going for Refuge are then levels of connection with the Buddha.

At the cultural level, the Buddha is simply the badge of one's culture and community, having some positive ethical and social influence upon one. In provisional Going for Refuge the Buddha begins to beckon as a personal ideal; one begins to recognise what he represents, both for oneself and for the entire universe. With effective Going for Refuge one has had a glimpse of the reality of Bodhi – or at least, in Sangharakshita's phrase, a 'glimpse of a glimpse' sufficient to keep one's efforts alive. Real Going for Refuge begins once one realises directly for oneself the true nature of the Buddha and absolute Going for Refuge is the point at which one merges with it.

Throughout the schema of the levels of Going for Refuge the Buddha and his Enlightenment are the object of one's aspiration. They represent the mystery that lies beyond one's present understanding and that one is

seeking to penetrate. As we have seen, Sangharakshita terms this the 'transcendental object', the image that stands in one's imaginative world for what passes beyond understanding but that gives life its meaning and focus. Without that transcendental object in one's imagination there can be no Going for Refuge in an effective sense.

This is a fundamental point in Sangharakshita's approach and worth re-stressing here. When one Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels there must be some felt sense of the Buddha and his Enlightened experience within one's own imagination. At every level of engagement with Buddhism, there will be an engagement with the image of the Buddha: first of all as a beloved cultural badge or sign, then as a provisional sense of the vastness that Buddhahood encompasses, then as a definite and abiding presence within one's imaginative experience that one can effectively commit oneself to, then as a force moving one onward and upward beyond oneself, and finally as a freedom and consummation quite beyond our knowing. It is this image of the Buddha at each level that we must look for if we are to discover the Buddha again for our times.

One's image of the Buddha will gradually emerge and develop as one involves oneself more and more deeply with the Dharma and the Sangha. One will first become accustomed to Buddhist symbols and especially to images of the Buddha, towards which one will feel some fascination and even devotion. This will often be initiated by the presence of a Buddha-statue in the shrine room where one is taught to meditate and hears the Dharma. One will find out about the Buddha's life and come to know some stories about him. As one's experience deepens one will come to understand what Buddhahood means and what part the Buddha has played in world history. Gradually the Buddha and his Enlightenment will take on some independent imaginative life within one. For some this will be quite clear and definite, perhaps connected with very particular visionary images. For many it will be something far more inchoate, perhaps more an atmosphere or a felt sense of the nature of a Buddha's awareness. Some will feel a growing presence in their lives, as if there was a consciousness greater than their own, encompassing them, even communicating with them.

A problem frequently arises here, as we have already seen: the problem of God. In the West most of those coming to Buddhism have either rejected Christianity and its God or have been raised in a materialist culture within which God is simply an empty myth, long exploded. The idea of feeling a presence within one of a consciousness greater than one's own is either to be rejected with loathing or to be laughed at as a minor and immature delusion. However, the image of the Buddha arises within the cultural space vacated by God. We must learn to accept stirrings in that

imaginative space, whilst being fully aware of the absolute differences between the Buddha as a transcendental object on the one hand and God, from whatsoever theological context. It will probably be very difficult indeed for Buddhism to develop in the Western world until we find the middle way between an acceptance of God and rejection of the deep imagination as a source of values, even of truth.

The Triratna Buddhist Community discovers the Buddha

The starting point for discovering the image of the Buddha is paying attention to him as an historical personality. On that basis our imaginations take off. We get at the inner reality of his Bodhi by first developing a vivid sense of his having been alive here on this Earth. This sense of the historical reality of the Buddha's life can be deliberately fostered in a number of ways, for instance, by having images of him as the principal focus in our shrine-rooms, rather than other forms that developed later in tradition on the basis of his image. Images of him are triggers for our recollection of him and can therefore be treated as if they were the Buddha himself: when entering the shrine-room one can act as if one was really coming into the presence of the Buddha; one can bow before the image as though bowing to the Buddha himself; one can recite pujas and vandana, addressing oneself directly to him – especially significant in this respect is the Tiratana Vandana, whose principal verses are found in the Pali Suttas, pronounced by the Buddha himself. These fundamental rituals are powerful means of bringing the image of the Buddha to life in one's imagination⁴³

We can also strengthen our sense of the Buddha's actual existence by learning about and reflecting on his life and by reading the Suttas that present him teaching the Dharma – reading them as much for an imaginative connection with him as for the specific teachings they contain. We can recall that whatever spiritual practices we engage in have come to us, directly or indirectly, from him: for instance, he taught our basic meditation practices, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Development of Loving-Kindness. We are, in this sense, very directly his disciples.

An especially powerful practice for developing a sense of the Buddha's historical reality and connecting with his significance is pilgrimage to the principal places connected with his life: Lumbini, where he was born, Bodhgaya, where he gained Enlightenment, Saranath, where he first taught the Dharma, and Kushinagara, where he entered Parinirvāṇa. He himself is presented in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta as saying that going on pilgrimage to these four places will 'arouse emotion', which is construed as a strong sense of commitment to following the path he discovered. He says that

when people see the stupas raised over his remains their 'hearts are made peaceful, and then, at the breaking-up of the body after death they go to a good destiny and re-arise in a heavenly world.'⁴⁴

These efforts to deepen a sense of the Buddha as an historical figure, activate his image in our imaginations – after all, our sense of any aspect of history is itself an act of imagination. Once that image has come alive it will take on deeper and richer significance as we contemplate it more closely and reflect upon it more wholeheartedly.

As contact with the Dharma deepens on this basis, so the image of the Buddha grows in power and presence. When the Buddha and his Enlightenment become the guiding force in one's life then one will commit oneself fully and effectively to the Buddhist path. In the Triratna Buddhist Order that commitment is expressed in ordination as a Dharmachari or Dharmacharini. Those responsible for selecting and ordaining candidates for ordination are especially looking for the enduring and effective presence of the image of Enlightenment in the candidate's life, continually drawing them on in their spiritual efforts.

This point is worth reiterating. One cannot Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels at all effectively unless there is a deep imaginative connection with the Three Jewels and especially with the Buddha and his Enlightenment. These ideals will be embodied in an image or images, standing within our imaginative experience for something beyond our present knowledge, enabling us to have a real felt sense of what Buddhahood signifies. As must be stressed again and again, 'image' here does not necessarily mean a visual image, although it frequently will find visual expression. Imagination deals in objects derived from all the physical senses and from subtle visionary senses, as well as from much less articulate intuitions, such as knowing that one is not alone in a room without actually catching sight of anyone. Indeed, much of our imaginative experience of Bodhi will be difficult to describe, even to ourselves. But that sense of something echoing in us from beyond us must be present if we are to commit ourselves to the Dharma life. It must not merely be present: it must be recognised and acknowledged, valued and developed.

In this connection Sangharakshita has commented that the image of the Buddha may at times be experienced, as it were, by its absence. One may be vividly aware of one's own unenlightenment, one's distance from the Buddha, rather than of the Buddha's own presence. This is not a feeling of remorsefulness (although that may be part of it, insofar as one has acted unskillfully), and it is definitely not connected with neurotic guilt, in the sense of feeling unworthy and unlovable because of one's childhood experiences. One may feel quite happy and confident, in an ordinary

human sense, and yet feel intensely that one is trapped by one's fundamental ignorance of the nature of things in a vicious circle of self-attachment. Indeed this recognition is necessary for a full realisation of the Buddha's image: it is only to the extent that one knows one is not the Buddha that one can know the Buddha: shadows reveal the light of the sun. Without this acknowledgement of the real state of things, the image of the Buddha cannot be illumined.

Those who formally commit themselves to the Dharma life through ordination into the Triratna Buddhist Order have felt the presence of the Buddha and his Bodhi in their imaginations and that is explicitly developed in a new dimension of spiritual practice – in Sangharakshita's fourfold System of Meditation this is the final stage, Spiritual Rebirth.⁴⁵ In this system, the stage of Spiritual Rebirth succeeds the stage of Spiritual Death, which is concerned with seeing through self-clinging. One then connects imaginatively with what transcends self-clinging – what is left when spiritual death has occurred to any extent. What remains is an image, the image of Enlightenment, and this one dwells upon. By dwelling upon that image one gradually readies it for illumination, when it attains its full, Enlightened significance.⁴⁶

It is the task of the Private Preceptor⁴⁷ to help the person they are ordaining to identify as best they can the Buddha and his Bodhi as represented in their imaginations. They will then work out together how to deepen and develop that connection, so that the image of Enlightenment is more and more present in their lives. This exploration will include, for instance, discovering what sounds invoke a sense of the Buddha's imaginative presence – this may be in the form of a traditional mantra or something more particular to the individual and his or her culture and character. From this mutual search there will gradually come to light a way for each individual to meditate on the image of the Buddha, keeping alive a sense of the Buddha's presence at all times.

It is not at all clear what will emerge within the Triratna Buddhist Order as this approach of searching for the Buddha in our imaginations is applied more and more deeply, without the framework of the Tibetan-derived theory and practices used up until now. It is, however, worth recognising that Enlightenment is already alive in the collective imagination of the Sangha, although perhaps not only or even mainly in terms of the traditional *sādhana*s or Mahayana images. All members of the Triratna Buddhist Order have been acknowledged to be Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels effectively. This means that the image of the Buddha was alive for each at the time of their ordination. In the forty and more years since the Order was formed, many have engaged deeply with that image as it has emerged in their imaginations. Already we are,

individually and collectively, re-imagining the Buddha and in us, and in others engaged in like endeavour, Buddhism is gradually finding expression in the contemporary world.

This exploration that the whole Order has embarked upon will give rise to quite new images and new ways of imagining the Buddha, although all based upon the same essential perspective and methodology. Some may be content with the way they are presently visualising the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and there is no reason for them to abandon what is Dharmically efficacious for them. Others may find that the images from the Mahayana are truly embodiments of their own imaginative life and that they can respond to them wholeheartedly, if less formally. Others again may find quite different figures and forms emerging in their explorations of who the Buddha really is, although these must be tested, in dialogue with preceptors and teachers, to try to discern whether they are genuinely illuminable images or merely powerful archetypes. Perhaps many will not find concrete imaginative focus for their ideal and may have a more shadowy and inchoate sense of an overwhelming supra-personal peace or compassion or awareness that has no form but is nonetheless real and active in their lives.

As time goes on and we take up the approach Sangharakshita is now suggesting, clusters of shared imaginative experience will emerge that will express the shapes that the Buddha assumes in our cultures. We will discover, just as our spiritual ancestors did, the most effective correspondences between images and illumination for our age and cultures, so that future generations will have images appropriate to them that will carry them on to illumination.

THE CONTEXT OF IMAGINATION

Imagination is the vehicle of the Dharma life. If we are to follow the path we must recognise, develop, and even become imagination. We do this especially in the three ways we have already explored: by discovering our natural sensitivity to the living world around us, by recognising and educating our spontaneous aesthetic responses, and by dwelling upon the image of the Buddha that we find in our own minds. But imagination requires a context if it is to unfold in a useful way that leads us on to Enlightenment, for imagination can lead to many difficulties if it is not properly understood and worked with. The wrong development of imagination brings moral stagnation, delusion, or even madness – after all, much that is evil in the world is the product of distorted imagination. In the Buddha-Dharma the necessary safeguards for the successful unfolding of imagination are to be found in Right View, mindfulness (especially

initially of the body), Sangha, ethics, and one might say in the Buddha himself. We will examine each of these in turn.

Right View, most basically expressed as *pratītya-samutpāda*, defines the limits of rational understanding. It cuts away all theoretical interpretation of our experience either as truly existing in an ultimate sense or as really non-existent. It prevents us from literalising our imaginative experience, either taking what is imaginative for real in a narrowly historical sense or dismissing it as mere fantasy. It is within each of these two tendencies, eternalism and nihilism, that the dangers to imagination lie. We may on the one hand take images and visions as revelations about the world of historical fact, as when we believe that we have a divine mission to carry out specific tasks – an extreme of this is violence committed in the name of religion, but there are many more apparently benign versions. On the other, we may take the world of historical fact as the only reality and thereby dismiss the imagination as mere fantasy, in which case it will manipulate us without our being conscious of it – arguably the effects of this are widely visible in the environmental degradation in the world today, brought about by our narrow scientific culture. These tendencies to take imaginative experience literally are exemplified in the *Brahmājāla Sutta*, which lists sixty-four wrong views, many of which arise from a misinterpretation of experience, whether of a historical or visionary kind.⁴⁸

Armed with Right View one can recognise the significance of the imaginative realm, taking it fully seriously in its own right, without interpreting it literally in terms of everyday experience. It is important that one gets as deep and clear a grasp of Right View as soon as possible in one's Dharma life, otherwise distortion and delusion may follow and lead to many problems – or one will simply escape the conflicts that arise by retreating into a merely conventional life. What getting a grasp of Right View essentially means is understanding what one is doing when one thinks – and what thinking cannot do.

Effectively to distinguish between thoughts and things, between the concepts that merely indicate realities and those realities themselves, is an art belonging to a highly advanced stage of spiritual culture⁴⁹ It is this culture that must develop in the contemporary world if imagination is to flourish.

The task of distinguishing between thoughts and things is to a considerable extent an intellectual one: one must learn to deconstruct one's own and others' literalisms – more traditionally, recognise and see through *mithyā dṛṣṭi* or wrong views. But it is also experiential. One needs to be able to tell in the moment itself the difference between what one is

actually experiencing and one's interpretation of it – between what is really going on and the stories we tell ourselves about it. This is the task of mindfulness training. Such training usually begins with mindfulness of the body – or better of bodily sensations (*sparśa* and *vedanā*, in traditional terms). By learning to recognise and accept these sensations fully, we ground ourselves in experience before it is interpreted – before *prapañca* or mental proliferation and interpretive construction arises. This process of noticing what is actually happening can then be extended from bodily sensations to other areas of experience: whether conceived of under the heading of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* or of Sangharakshita's four dimensions of awareness.⁵⁰ On this basis we can allow imagination to unfold without it being seized upon by literalised interpretations of which we are largely unconscious.

Mindfulness does not, however, merely clear the path for imagination by grounding it in uninterpreted experience. As one becomes more mindful in any particular field, what one experiences is revealed in increasing imaginative richness and depth. Thus, when one becomes directly mindful of particular bodily sensations they are discovered to be more and more satisfying, subtle, and engaging. Mindfulness itself becomes imagination. Thus practices such as the Mindfulness of Breathing or the Development of Metta or Loving-kindness take one deeper and deeper into the world of imagination. One begins by concentrating either on the sensations of breathing or the desire for the well-being of self and others, however, the finer and more intense the concentration, the subtler and richer the objects or images of experience reveal themselves to be, and one enters into the imaginative realms of *dhyāna*.⁵¹ This has the effect both of refreshing and cleansing the mind and of freeing up imagination so that it is receptive to the illumination of its images.

Having an intellectual grasp of the nature of things and distinguishing between experience and interpretation do not come easily, especially when such accomplishments go against the grain of culture and threaten cherished habit patterns. A great deal of support and guidance is needed. This comes from others who share one's Dharma aspiration and especially from those who have greater experience and confidence than oneself – it comes from horizontal and vertical *kalyāṇa mitratā* in the context of Sangha.

Not only does Sangha provide the environment for learning these basic skills, it will be a crucible of the imagination. Within the Sangha imagination will be highly valued and widely experienced, so that all can gain confidence in exploring the vast and unknown territories that lie within them and around them. Sangha members will share a common language for their own developing imaginations, forming an imaginative

culture that nourishes and uplifts all who engage with it. Friends will help one to express the imaginative life within one. Preceptors, teachers, and kalyaṇā mitras will help one to find for oneself images to feed upon that are most readily capable of carrying illumination, distinguishing them from ones that appeal merely to ideology or sentiment.⁵² And they will safeguard one from the various delusions, intoxications, and inflations that literalised imagination inevitably breeds. They will do so by helping one to disentangle the confusions of understanding and emotion that frequently accompany the awakening imagination.

Besides one's own efforts and the imaginative culture of the Sangha, there is a wider context: the context of the Buddha himself and the tradition that has flowed on from him to the present day. One may check one's own imaginative experience against the Buddha's teachings and, if there is any conflict, investigate where one has been mistaken. The most basic level of such checking is by way of the ethical precepts. Whatever the promptings of one's imagination, they should not lead one to act in contravention of the code of non-violence and love that the precepts embody, since they describe the actual behaviour of the Buddha. This is a serious injunction. Religious inspiration can sometimes be used to justify the most inhuman acts of violence and destruction. Even in Buddhism examples can be found of the use of doctrine to excuse actions that surely the Buddha would never have countenanced.⁵³ Although the precepts are often difficult to apply in practice because of the complexity of life, they are nonetheless a fundamental safeguard against any form of delusion, whether divinely inspired or of any other kind.

But the context of the Buddha and his tradition has more to offer our imaginative explorations. By referring one's own experience to that of the Buddha and his many inspired disciples one can gain encouragement, validation, and an enlarged perspective for one's own imaginative journey. By continuously Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as presented by one's own teachers and practised within one's own Sangha one will safely and beneficially discover the infinite skies of imagination within which one will encounter the Buddha.

The context for the unfolding imagination is crucial if one is not to lose one's way or give up and compromise with the conventional world – the world of mere fancy. But, once one enters the Stream of the Dharma, once imagination is permanently illumined, no illusions can hold one back and imagination unfolds spontaneously and naturally in accordance with Dharma niyāma conditionality. One need not consciously seek out or create a context because the context will spontaneously grow in and around one.

Before that glad time, our task is to create together a new imaginative culture by taking our imaginations seriously and working to unfold them more and more fully. In doing this we will find that the world around us vibrates with us and that our own efforts are mirrored in the life of all things. We will discover creative depths within our own culture from which new works will arise expressive of the Dharma's timeless spirit. And we will find the Buddha, appearing to us in a form that is deeply familiar yet resonant of an infinite mystery that one day we may understand.

*Oh, we must weep
And beg the stars
Descend into our hearts
And make us
Glad forever;
Yet they will not obey
Unless we ourselves
Make of our bones a ladder
And climb, lovingly,
Up to them.*

Bodhgaya, 25th November 2010

NOTES

- 1 See Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel*, 'The Journey to Il Convento', p.63.
- 2 See a number of articles in *The Priceless Jewel*, and Sangharakshita, *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra*.
- 3 For a thorough account of this process as it took place in England, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.
- 4 See Dr B. R. Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*.
- 5 A crore is ten million in contemporary Indian languages – including Indian English!
- 6 Dr Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, 'Schemes of Books', No.3 'Symbols of Hinduism': The first chapter was to be, 'Symbols represent the Soul of a Thing', and a further chapter was to be headed, 'Symbols of Buddhism'.
- 7 Dr B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bk IV, Pt 1, Para. 6: 'Mere morality is not enough; it must be sacred and universal'.
- 8 See especially Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, many of the essays in *The Priceless Jewel* and *Alternative Traditions*. See also my *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Ch. 10.
- 9 *Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma*, p. 19.
- 10 See Sangharakshita, *Alternative Traditions*, 'Buddhism and William Blake'.
- 11 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I, Ch. 13, pp. 304-5.
- 12 Mentioned in a letter to his brother, 21st December, 1817: '...Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. It is perhaps significant that Dr Ambedkar's teacher and mentor at Columbia University, the Pragmatist Philosopher, John Dewey, refers to Keats' notion as an influence on his own thought: John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Penguin (2005):33-4. It is also interesting to consider that negative capability is what one needs to cultivate in order to 'just sit'. It should however be clearly noted that the receptive attitude of 'negative capability' is exercised in the context of karmic effort. Mere listlessness, passivity, and drifting are not receptivity. A great deal of effort is required to experience something worth being receptive to.
- 13 *Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma*, p. 10.
- 14 The laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle: A equals A; A does not equal not A; either A or not A.
- 15 This term was used by a Japanese philosopher of the Kyoto school, but Sangharakshita says that he is investing it with a significantly different meaning and therefore sees no value in tracking down the original reference.
- 16 H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*. There is a very useful summary of his main argument in Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, pp. 301-5.

17 This recalls Wittgenstein's late philosophy, rejecting his earlier 'picture theory of meaning' and discussing meaning as concerned with the 'putting to work of a tool'.

18 Sangharakshita, *Living with Awareness*, p. 62.

19 Udāna, IV,v, trans. F. L. Woodward, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Part II. See also Udāna, II,iii, for his concern with kindness to animals, in this case a snake.

20 References are to be found throughout the Pali Canon, but Udāna affords many examples.

21 Sangharakshita, *Complete Poems 1941-1994*, p. 135.

22 Sangharakshita recalls, for instance, seeing stones in an exhibition of Tantric art in London; they were oval in shape and very smooth, having been formed in river beds, and it seemed as if a powerful 'vibration' emanated from them.

23 See Subhuti with Subhamati, *Buddhism and Friendship*.

24 P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*.

25 Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, p. 121.

26 MN10, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and MN137, *Śaḷāyatanavibhanga Sutta*.

27 It is interesting to note that this is true of much that might be considered compatible with or even a vehicle for the Dharma life. I have been struck by the usefulness of the training in human communication given in the system known as Non Violent Communication (usually referred to as NVC), which aims to develop skilful communication in the context of empathy for others. But without the clarity of *samyag dṛṣṭi* and the practice of ethics it can easily be abused – and, in my personal observation, frequently is.

28 This was established by Dharmachari Padmaraja, who has since left the Order, but whose name deserves remembrance and gratitude for a significant achievement, yet to be bettered.

29 *The Greater Mandala*, *Mitrata* 16, December 1977.

30 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard, p. 55.

31 This is a point worth dwelling on. Many who have had some 'spiritual' experience use the language of God, because it lies readily to hand. When one denies the existence of God, especially if one does it as vehemently as I have certainly done in the past, one appears to deny something that they have actually experienced and that is very important to them. This point applies more generally. Often people use very imprecise and problematic language to talk about what may be something genuine and deeply meaningful to them. One needs somehow to affirm the experience and its significance, whilst suggesting a less problematic interpretation.

32 Perhaps this is the significance of Ratnasambhava's Wisdom of Equality, which is why Sangharakshita has referred to him as the 'Buddha of Beauty'.

33 Sangharakshita has suggested that this is what is meant by Mahāmudra, the 'Great Symbol'.

34 The sacred island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, is apparently spoken of in this way.

35 See Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Part 1, section 5. See also the discussion in my companion paper, *Revering and Relying upon the Dharma*, p.19.

36 SN I,6,2. See my companion paper, *Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma*, p. 18, for a fuller exploration of this point.

37 For instance, we find Sariputta doing so at SN V,48,58.

38 Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Orthodoxy in Buddhism*.

39 See Michael K. Jerryson & Mark Juergensmeyer, eds, *Buddhism and Warfare*, for the disastrous misuses of the śūnyatā doctrine.

40 I once asked Sangharakshita whether contemplation of the image of Apollo could lead to Enlightenment – could be illumined. He replied that theoretically it could, but that it might take a very long time. I asked how long and he replied, 'Many millennia, even kalpas – if at all!' There is perhaps here some possible ambiguity in the terminology used within the Triratna Buddhist Community, stemming from Sangharakshita's own usages, that may complicate the issue. He sometimes speaks, as I have done in this paper, of the visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that appeared especially in the Mahayana phase of development as 'archetypal', even as the 'archetypes of Enlightenment'. This term is also found in the Analytical Psychology of C. G. Jung, who spoke of deep patterns in what he termed the collective unconscious of humanity that find endlessly varying expression in dreams, visions, art, and in pathological delusions. The forms might vary, but the themes remain constant. Sangharakshita, however, means something rather different by 'archetypal', although there is clearly a connection with Jung's usage. The 'archetypal' Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are expressions of Enlightenment, not merely of primal patterns in the mind of humanity – although Enlightenment itself could be seen as a particular expression of one or more such archetypes of the collective unconscious. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas found especially in the Mahayana express illumination and their contemplation may lead to illumination, while all that is archetypal in the Jungian sense is certainly not illumined or illuminable. When we speak of 'archetypes of Enlightenment', what archetype means is something more like idealised or imaginative, belonging to a 'visionary' dimension – although not necessarily a visual one. They are stripped of all historical attributes, although these are sometimes read back into them, as when Nepalese Buddhists tell that the Kathmandu valley was made with a sweep of Manjushri's sword. Whether or not the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas originated in any historical figures, they have come to be hypostatisations or embodiments of the Enlightenment we know of through the Buddha Shakyamuni,

drawing out its inner nature and allowing us to come into relationship with it, so that we too may be illumined.

41 F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, see Robert G. Morrison (Dharmachari Sagaramati), *Nietzsche and Buddhism*.

42 Sangharakshita, *The History of My Going for Refuge*. See also my *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Ch. 4.

43 I believe a great deal more could very usefully be made of the symbolism and ritual of shrine-rooms as a principal way of initiating an imaginative connection with the Buddha. The origins of the Buddha image seem to have been in the invocation of his presence so that one felt one was actually dwelling with him. The shrine hall is often people's first imaginative contact with the Buddha. Similarly, I have come to think that we could make much more of bowing – indeed could have much more of a real bow. In TBM in the West shrine-room etiquette dictates a mere bend from the waist on entering and leaving, whereas in India the practice is to touch one's head to the floor before the image – as is common throughout the Buddhist world. I have long felt that the former rather meagre gesture deprives us of a very powerful and effective ritual that encourages a sense of the Buddha as completely transcending us and a deep gratitude and devotion to him.

44 DN16;5,8-12: *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe.

45 Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*.

46 In traditional terms, the *samāyāsattva* becomes the vehicle for the *jñānasattva*. The *samāyāsattva* or 'oath-bound being' is the image we construct in our imaginations; the mental picture we paint of the Buddha or Bodhisattva. The *jñānasattva* is illumined by the Dharma, which 'descends' into the uplifted *samāyāsattva*.

47 Ordination within the Triratna Buddhist Order has two parts, one in private, with only the ordinand and his or her Private Preceptor present, and one in public, often with others also being ordained, conducted by the Public Preceptor. The Private and Public ceremonies both consist principally of the recitation of the Refuges and Precepts, but the Private ceremony also contains initiation into an imaginative connection with Bodhi, until recently in the form of a Buddha or Bodhisattva drawn from traditional sources, although Sangharakshita now wants us to take a more radical approach, as this paper outlines.

48 DN1.

49 Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Ch. 1, IX.

50 See Sangharakshita, *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*, 'Perfect Awareness'.

51 Traditionally each of the *dhyānas* is equated with a particular god-realm, each successively subtler than the one that precedes it. Each, in other words, corresponds to a more subtle dimension of imaginative or visionary experience.

52 For instance, Sangharakshita is very cautious about the nature of the interest some women have in choosing at ordination female Buddhas or Bodhisattvas to meditate upon, on the grounds that they share the same female form. Because such choices are sometimes based on the superficial motivations of sentiment or ideology they do not touch the deeper imagination and therefore cannot be a basis for illumination. Similarly superficial choices often lie behind attraction to wrathful or demonic figures – and indeed even at times to the more 'standard' forms: for instance, liking Manjushri because of his 'manly' sword-wielding. We are often not deep enough as individuals to know how to choose. Most people are therefore better off, he believes, trying to relate more closely to the historical Buddha – and seeing what arises from that. Needless to say, he is far from saying that all who chose to meditate on female figures are doing so for superficial reasons.

53 See note 36 above.

Buddhophany

A Communication from Urgyen Sangharakshita to the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community

I have been very pleased that Subhuti's article on 'Re-imagining the Buddha', expounding ideas I had discussed with him, has been received with so much interest and, on the whole, so favourably. These are indeed issues crucial for the future of the Dharma in the modern world.

The article is, however, quite long and covers a variety of different topics. With Subhuti's help, I have therefore set out below what I consider to be some of the most significant principles that emerge from the article, at least from one important point of view. I would like all Order members to reflect upon and discuss these principles and to put them into effect within their own spiritual lives and in their teaching and practice within the Triratna Buddhist Community.

Sd Urgyen Sangharakshita

Principles for Re-imagining the Buddha

1. A successful Dharma life requires an imaginative connection with the Goal, some definite sense of reality beyond self-clinging. If there is no such connection and sense then spiritual life becomes no more than a refinement of self-identity, at best.

2. Any Order member who, as a means of making such a connection, is successfully engaging with his or her sadhana practice on the basis that has existed till now has my encouragement to continue. Whatever does evolve in the future as a way of imaginatively connecting with the goal should incorporate all the benefits and experience of what has been done in this respect till now.

3. The Triratna Buddhist Order and Community is not a continuation of the Tibetan tradition, or of any other particular Buddhist tradition. The particular iconographic, theoretical, and ritual frameworks of Tibetan or other traditions are not our reference point. This should be plain from the

imagery, ceremonies, and rhetoric in common use in the Triratna Buddhist Community. It should be clear that whatever practices are done in the Order depend on principles derived from the Buddha himself, on the basis of my own presentation of the Buddha's teaching. The practical test of this point is whether or not some people feel any need to refer to Tibetan or other teachers and sources to do their practices properly, or to take them further and deeper, or whether or not they see that tradition as a source of authority for what they are doing. All this holds good both for those who do continue on the old basis and those who do not.

4. The Buddha Shakyamuni - his life, teaching, person, and image - is our central and key reference point. It is through him that we know of Enlightenment. All later developments in Buddhism emerge from his realization and teaching. Going for Refuge to the Buddha in the first place means Going for Refuge to the Buddha Shakyamuni as teacher and embodiment of the Ideal. Order members teaching at our centres need to emphasize this from the outset of people's engagement with the Triratna Buddhist Community.

5. The Archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that emerged later in Buddhist history, are all to be understood as 'hypostases' or imaginative embodiments of the Buddha's Enlightened experience and qualities. They cannot therefore be truly understood without there first being a deep understanding of, and feeling for, the Buddha of history. People should be encouraged to focus their practice on the historical Buddha, not the archetypal figures, until they have developed this appreciation.

6. The various images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas emerged in a natural and unselfconscious process of historical unfolding as later Buddhists continued to imagine the 'world' of Enlightenment. They represented their imaginative experience of the Buddha and his Enlightenment in forms drawn from their own cultural imaginations. It is this process of imaginative unfolding, found especially in Mahayana, that should be our inspiration, not primarily the forms it created. This represents a Middle Way between the rejection of the Mahayana and its images and its wholesale adoption.

7. The development and engagement of imagination is one of the keys to spiritual life and should be a major aspect of the Triratna Buddhist Community everywhere. Our effort should especially be to allow imagination to unfold naturally, not to force it into any particular iconographic mould, especially one from a culture not our own. We should consciously allow images of the Buddha and his Enlightened experience to arise from our own cultural circumstances.

8. We may continue to draw inspiration and example from the iconography of the Buddhist East, but we need to beware, in doing so, that we do not inhibit imaginative development within our own cultures, and that we do not suggest an identification with any particular form of Buddhism. At present our greatest danger in this respect comes from the overuse of Tibetan imagery and styles.

9. We need to take further steps to develop an approach to sadhana practice, and to the initiatory aspect of ordination, that puts these principles into practice. The main point here is that, rather than giving people 'off-the-peg' images from Mahayana tradition at the outset, we work with individuals to find images that express those aspects of the ideal of Enlightenment that most strongly appeal to them or are most appropriate to them. However, we would first need to ensure that they had a strong sense of the historical Buddha and of Going for Refuge to him, so that any archetypal forms they contemplated were experienced as hypostases of him.

10. Work on developing this new approach, under the direction of the Public Preceptors, needs to start immediately.

Initiation into a New Life: the Ordination Ceremony in Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Practice

A message from Ugyen Sangharakshita to all members of the Triratna Buddhist Order:

I am very pleased once again to introduce to you an article written by Subhuti, on the basis of conversations I have had with him. Each successive article has enabled me to communicate to you all my present thinking on an important topic that I believe has major implications for the future of the Triratna Buddhist Community, and therefore of Buddhism in the modern world. In this paper, too, Subhuti has very faithfully expressed my point of view on the subject of our Ordination Ceremony. I have particularly appreciated the way he has conveyed the integrity of my teaching and the key position that ordination has within it. It does all hang together, even if all the connections are not always easy to discern.

I ask all Order members to study this article very deeply. And I ask Private Preceptors, especially, to cooperate closely with the Public Preceptors in putting it into effect. This will demand a great deal of work on the part of all Preceptors: first of all, to make sure that they truly understand what is being presented, then to consider carefully how to apply it to their own disciples, and finally to put it fully into practice. This really does mean a retraining, as Subhuti expresses it, and I ask you all to take this very seriously.

As this paper shows, ordination is the crux of our whole system of spiritual life and practice. From the moment of a person's first contact with our movement, he or she should be able to discover a comprehensive and balanced approach that is appropriate to them, which leads them at the appropriate time to enter the Order. I ask all Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis to look carefully at everything that is taught in the Triratna Community to make sure it does indeed contribute fully to this

Dharmacharinis to look carefully at everything that is taught in the Triratna Community to make sure it does indeed contribute fully to this system of practice – and I am very pleased indeed that the International Council of the Triratna Buddhist Community has initiated a movement-wide exercise of this kind.

And of course I urge you all to apply this system fully and deeply to yourselves: the Karmic work of integration and developing positive emotion, and more especially the explicitly Dharmic work of spiritual receptivity, death, and rebirth. If each of us does work diligently on ourselves in this way, then everything else will follow.

Sd. Sangharakshita,

Madhyamaloka, 25th November 2011

A Note on the Second Revision

The paper that is published here in its second revised form first appeared in November 2011. It was very quickly revised in January 2012, the changes consisting in the removal of a relatively detailed description of the private ordination ceremony given in what first appeared, so as not to undermine the ceremony's ritual significance by making it too familiar.

The three versions of the text (November 2011, January 2012, and this one, November 2018) reflect something of a process that we have been through in these past few years, as Sangharakshita and the Public Preceptors have sought a formula for the way in which meditation practices are to be taken on during the private ordination ceremony. In doing so, we have wanted to do justice to a number of concerns, three of which were especially addressed in the first version of the paper:

1. We wanted to move decisively away from the theoretical, practical, and institutional context of Tantric Initiation, especially as found in the Tibetan tradition. This is necessary because practice of *Buddhānusmṛti*, contemplating Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in meditation, has entered the Order, in the first place, through Sangharakshita, who did receive such initiation from Tibetan teachers. However, in the Triratna Buddhist Order, we are not practising in that framework, but have a different and distinctive one that this paper attempts to set out, although clearly the contacts that Bhante had with his teachers have been very important to him and therefore to the Order and in no sense do we wish to reject that.

2. We wanted to make sure that whatever practice a new Order member does take on emerges from and is related to their own unfolding spiritual experience, especially as that expresses itself in the Ordination ceremony. In particular, this requires that the elements of Spiritual Death and Rebirth should be explicitly embodied in daily meditation.

3. We wanted to make sure that people take on practices that they will be able to maintain faithfully in the midst of their customary circumstances.

The first version of the paper that emerged to meet these concerns offered a quite informal approach, one that could be tailored to each individual. That would therefore inevitably lead to a widening range of ways of practising. Although this certainly has worked well for some, and is in itself valid, many have preferred a much more structured approach. Furthermore, some of us have felt that there was something missing: what might be called, the element of lineage, which gives a sense of continuity through our preceptors, through Bhante, and on back into the roots of the Buddha-Dharma in India. At the same time, the possibility of increasing diversity of ways of practising does not strengthen the sense across the Order of shared Dharmic experience in daily meditation. Since the paper was first published, we have been facing more and more the need to strengthen the unity and continuity of the Order and movement, as we enter a future without Sangharakshita. This present revision does so in two ways:

4. Since the College of Public Preceptors accepts Bhante's definition of the Order as the 'community of the disciples and disciples of disciples of Ugyen Sangharakshita, practising according to his particular presentation of the Buddha's Dharma', we want the practices that most people take on at Ordination to be directly connected to him, insofar as they have been taught by him to his disciples, who have then handed them on to theirs – recognising that Sangharakshita uses the term 'disciple' in a particular sense, taking into account that some are uncomfortable with some of its possible connotations.*

5. We want to strengthen the unity of the Order by making sure there is a 'high degree of commonality' of practice and teaching. We therefore want most Order members to be regularly practising meditations that are widely shared. To that end, we want most new Order members at ordination to take on a practice from a relatively small pool of meditations on Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that Sangharakshita himself has practised and has taught

* See *A Note on 'Disciple': a Postscript to 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?'*, <https://sangharakshita.org/interviews/index.html>.

to his disciples. And we would like most Order members to have at least some experience of meditating on each of these figures, in the course of their life in the Order, so as to strengthen that sense of a shared range of spiritual influence.

In response to these concerns, this present re-revision brings us full circle, more or less, to the way practices were given at Ordination in the early days of the Order. However, it only apparently does so, because the way in which the practices are to be given and undertaken has now been placed much more firmly in Sangharakshita's distinctive presentation of the Buddha's teaching. And the journey that we have been on has changed the way in which we experience these practices and hand them on to others. Though we have come back to the same place, in one sense, in another what we will now be doing is much more subtle and flexible as a result of the lessons we have learned along the way. How this all comes together is the subject of this paper, especially in this, its second revision.

Modifications to the previous version have been made in just two passages. The first was carried out at Bhante's explicit request, with his usual attention to detail, in the section, 'The System of Spiritual Life'. Mahamati relayed Bhante's thoughts, which I quote in full, since they reveal something of Bhante's concerns about the way the Dharma is communicated:

In your figure 1, where the five stages are represented in a vertical or hierarchical relationship it is clear that the stages come to fruition in dependence on the former stage or stages. However when the vertical is laid down onto a horizontal axis it could be misunderstood that the latter stages can come to fruition without the former. This could be taken as implying Buddha nature. So Bhante and Paramartha are of the view that there needs to be a clarification in the paper to guard against this possible misunderstanding.

I hope I have satisfactorily guarded against that possible misunderstanding in my revision.

The penultimate section, 'Recontextualising the Ordination Ceremony', has been extensively reworked in accordance with Bhante's thinking in the last three or so years, partly relayed to me in personal conversation and partly to other Public and Private Preceptors. I have also taken into account discussion that has taken place in the Preceptors College.

I sent this version to Bhante just two weeks ago, asking him to check the changes I had made. He asked Mahamati to read it to him, but unfortunately he was unable to summon the energy to take it in. Just days later, he was dead, concerned to do his duty to the end. All I can say is that I have tried to be as faithful as I can to what I understand Bhante's position to be – and that, in the

past, he has made few corrections to what I have written in these papers before they were published, having had me or others read them to him several times over. His comments have mainly been to do with grammar and style!

I have shown this version to Saddhaloka, the Chair of the College, and to Paramabandhu and Ratnadharini, two of the Deputy Chairs, as well as to Maitreyi and Padmavajra, as Preceptors of long standing with much experience of the issues touched on here. They have all offered useful comments and I have modified the text on that basis. They have all approved this final version.

Publishing this at this time is poignant indeed, especially knowing it was one of Bhante's last acts to try to go through it. I hope that, in my own particular style and with my own much more limited understanding, I have managed to communicate a slight glimpse of the vast and majestic vision on which our Order rests. May it help us to appreciate more fully our departed teacher, the greatly precious Ugyen Sangharakshita.

Subhuti

3rd November 2018

INITIATION INTO A NEW LIFE: The Ordination ceremony in Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Practice

The ceremony by which one becomes a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order is the crux of Ugyen Sangharakshita's entire teaching. In that ordination, with its two parts, public and private, all the elements of his presentation of the Dharma are distilled and ritually enacted. The individual undergoing ordination is usually profoundly affected by the symbolic resonance of all that happens and will sense the tying together of many threads of meaning and purpose. They will usually feel that their whole experience within the Triratna Buddhist Community has been a training for this moment: and one who has been ordained will spend the rest of their life as Sangharakshita's disciple, working out the full implications of what was germinal in that ceremony.

Over the more than forty years since the Order was founded, the nature of the ordination ceremony and the way in which it is understood has undergone a slow evolution as Sangharakshita's own particular presentation of the Buddha's teaching has become clearer and more consistent. I recall more than forty years ago my first visit to the Three Jewels Centre in Central London, then the only 'FWBO' centre. Entering shyly into the cramped and crowded reception room, I took refuge in the assiduous study of the noticeboard, on which was a document setting forth the ordinations

available in the Western Buddhist Sangha, as it was then still called. There were four in all: Upāsaka/ikā ('male/female lay-disciple'), Maha-upāsaka/ikā ('senior lay-disciple'), Bodhisattva, and Bhikshu/ni (monk or nun). Some three years later, Sangharakshita did indeed ordain one Maha-upāsikā, for which ceremony I myself was present, and one Maha-upāsaka, who also took the Bodhisattva ordination.²

By the early 'eighties, Sangharakshita had made explicit that Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life, repeated at every stage of one's spiritual journey and in every aspect of one's endeavour. Indeed, Going for Refuge can be seen as the application by the individual of a principle at work within the universe as a whole, an omnipresent evolutionary impulse that becomes self-aware in humanity. Ordination, in the Buddhist context, is the conscious and wholehearted embracing of this evolutionary momentum – an act of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha that is effective because one has sufficient psychological integration to put one's full energies behind it.

There is then, Sangharakshita says, no need for different ordination ceremonies – the various kinds of ordination found in Buddhist tradition often representing a progressive loss of understanding of the full significance of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Having declared one's commitment and had that witnessed by one's teachers, one needs no more. One simply needs to work that out more and more fully at every stage and in every aspect of one's life. All this Sangharakshita first made clear in a talk, *Going for Refuge*, given in India in 1981, and later and more fully in *The History of My Going for Refuge*, published in 1988, showing his gradual development of the meaning of Going for Refuge and its relation to ordination. This he saw as embodied in the new Buddhist Order he had founded – then the Western Buddhist Order/Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, known today as the Triratna Buddhist Order. All four ordinations as set out in that notice I saw in 1969 are now condensed in one Dharmachari/ni ordination, that ordination embodying a lifelong and effective commitment to a Dharma 'career'.

This is the foundation of our present understanding of ordination in the Triratna Buddhist Order and therefore of the ceremony within which ordination is given. However, Sangharakshita considers that there is still some tidying up to be done, so that the ceremony is made fully consistent with his presentation of the Dharma and any ambiguities about its relation to other traditional rituals are removed. In a series of discussions I had with him over the last year or more, he explained how he understands the ceremony now and how he wants us to conduct it, and this is the subject of

2 All who received these 'higher' ordinations have since left the Order.

my present paper. He has seen what I have written and affirms that it does represent his thinking and his wishes, albeit in my words, not his. Although no major changes are called for in the theory and practice of the ordination ceremony, he considers that these subtle points are important and asks that they are fully digested and gradually implemented, under the direction of the Public Preceptors' College.

The Wider Context

We need to start our exploration by placing ordination in the broadest possible context, recapitulating in brief key elements of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

The Dharma life is lived to attain *bodhi*, the liberation from all suffering first achieved in our era by the Buddha Shakyamuni. It is carried out within the overall context of *pratitya samutpada*, the flow of dependently arising events that makes up reality in its entirety. Liberation is possible because there are currents within the flow that lead in the direction of Enlightenment, regularities or laws that, taken advantage of, lead to the attainment of what the Buddha attained. The Dharma life essentially consists in active cooperation with those currents that lead to *bodhi*. The regularities or laws that make Buddhahood possible can be grouped into two kinds, under the heading of the Karma Niyama and the Dharma Niyama.

Working with Karma Niyama processes involves recognising oneself as a moral agent and intentionally cultivating ever more skilful actions of body, speech, and mind, so that progressively more satisfying, subtle, flexible, and open states of consciousness emerge as their fruit. Such states will be more and more free from subjective or self-oriented bias and colouring, and thus more in tune with the way things are. This phase of the spiritual path culminates when one's karmic efforts have conditioned the emergence of a consciousness that it is capable of absorbing fully the true nature of reality.

Dharma Niyama processes are first felt as a pull to self-transcendence or a glimpse of life beyond self-clinging – a first hint of *samyag drsti* or 'Perfect Vision', which often initiates the spiritual quest. They begin to unfold in a decisive way at Stream-entry, when the sense of separate agency is seen as an illusory construct, however essential it may be in the Karmic phase of the Path. There then emerges a spontaneous flow of increasingly non-egoistic volitions that unfailingly result in skilful activity. Before Stream-Entry, one works with Dharma Niyama processes by developing receptivity to the pull of that current within one's own consciousness, systematically cultivating devotion to whatever embodies that stream of non-egoistic willing, especially in the form of the Buddha and of his teaching. Above all,

one makes a continuous effort to undermine one's own ego-clinging by seeing through the illusions that sustain it.

Stages of Commitment

The Dharma life requires active cooperation with these Karma and Dharma Niyama conditioned processes that are ever present potentialities of reality. It requires a conscious and explicit reorientation of all aspects of life so as to build up the successive conditions for these processes to unfold. This conscious and explicit reorientation attains its fullest and clearest expression in the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, in which one commits oneself to becoming like the Buddha by cooperating with the forces of Karma and Dharma in inspired connection with the Arya-Sangha – which itself is a Refuge because it consists of those in whom the Dharma Niyama processes have become dominant: who have fully 'Entered the Stream of the Dharma'.

Commitment is gradual, engaging more and more of one's energies as one aligns oneself more and more fully with Karma and Dharma processes. Sangharakshita distinguishes five stages in this growing commitment: five levels of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. The **Cultural** level is not truly a commitment at all, because there is as yet no integrated moral individuality. It consists in a sense of allegiance to Buddhism and its values because it is part of one's culture and of the social group to which one belongs by birth and education. Through this identification one will be influenced to act in a morally positive way and that may eventually lead to the development of genuine moral self-consciousness. **Provisional** Going for Refuge arises in moments of temporary inspiration or insight, perhaps some glimpse of Perfect Vision, but this does not have enough weight behind it to be sustained. Nonetheless, one will from time to time make some effort to work with the Karmic and Dharmic kinds of conditionality and that sooner or later may enable one to commit oneself more effectively.

Effective Going for Refuge takes place on the basis of a compelling glimpse of what lies beyond self-clinging and of a sufficient integration of one's energies to constitute a more or less consistent moral agency. One is then in a position to cultivate both Karma and Dharma Niyama processes in an effective and continuous way. However, progress is entirely dependent on a constant application of willed effort. When Going for Refuge is **Real**, Dharma Niyama processes are dominant, unfolding spontaneously through the individual who cooperates fully with them, overcoming successively more subtle depths of self-clinging. **Absolute** Going for Refuge is the point of Enlightenment itself, at which there is nothing but a flow of Dharma Niyama processes - of pure non-egoistic volition.

In this schema, it is Effective Going for Refuge that is critical. One might say that it is the real battle ground of spiritual life. Before this, at the Provisional stage, no systematic progress is made because there is no consistent and sustained commitment and therefore no consistent and sustained effort to cultivate the necessary Karmic and Dharmic conditions upon which progress depends. At the later stage of Real Going for Refuge, progress is spontaneous and further effort can only speed up a process that is already self-sustaining. To move from the Provisional to the Real stage requires the conscious commitment of Effective Going for Refuge. It is this stage of commitment that is declared and witnessed at ordination, because it is the stage at which one truly becomes committed to the spiritual path.

Stages of spiritual practice and progress

Commitment to working with Karma and Dharma kinds of conditionality so as to achieve Enlightenment is expressed in the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. But how is that commitment to be put into effect? Of course, Sangharakshita draws on the basic teachings of Buddhism to expound his theoretical and practical perspective on spiritual life. However, the basis of his central presentation can be found in a lecture given in 1978, 'The System of Meditation'. Here he distinguished four stages of deepening practice: Integration, Positive Emotion, Spiritual Death, and Spiritual Rebirth. These four stages were his own reworking of Mahayana teaching, derived from Sarvastivadin sources, the 'Five Chief Paths', to which he attached new labels and a slightly different interpretation. Although in that lecture he cast them as stages of *meditation*, they are clearly to be applied more broadly as stages in spiritual life itself, to be worked at in all aspects of practice.

Each successive stage engages more deeply with the progressive trends in conditionality, activating the Karma Niyama processes first and then those of the Dharma Niyama. Each can only develop to its highest degree once the preceding stage has been made firm – this is a 'Path of Regular Steps'. The succeeding stage does not however leave the preceding behind but, so to speak, incorporates it and further fulfils it.

The **Stage of Integration** is concerned with cultivating a full experience of and responsibility for oneself as a moral agent, capable of working with the forces of Karma to develop a progressively fitter consciousness, in accordance with Karma Niyama processes. This is achieved especially through the practice of mindfulness, beginning with mindfulness of the body and its activity – and in meditation particularly by means of the Mindfulness of Breathing. However, the social context in which one lives, as well as one's work and way of life, certainly early in one's spiritual efforts, all have a powerful, often decisive, effect on whether or not one develops integration, and thereby the succeeding stages.

The **Stage of Positive Emotion** consists in the systematic cultivation of skilful intentions and actions that bring the karmic fruit of a more finely tuned mind. This is the ethical stage and is fostered by applying the Precepts to one's activity and by cultivating skilful intentions through meditations like the Mettabhavana. In this stage one will be working more deeply at integration, working not only at what Sangharakshita calls 'horizontal integration' but also at the vertical kind, wherein one deliberately develops higher states of consciousness, such as the *dhyanas*. These purify and refine the mind by freeing it temporarily from the compelling fixity of the sense world, rendering it more and more fit to absorb the impact of reality.

In these two stages, one works more and more broadly and deeply with the Karmic trend in reality, creating the basis for recognising the truth of things and allowing Dharma Niyama processes to guide one's life. Integration and Positive Emotion are, one might say, ploughing, fertilising, and watering the soil so that sowing may take place and the crop may grow.

The next stage, that of **Spiritual Death**, is directly concerned with the cultivation of those Dharmic processes – the actual sowing of seeds. Its focus is on seeing through our misunderstandings about the nature of reality itself, especially about who and what we ourselves are. Spiritual Death means seeing through our habitual delusions, our automatic misreadings of our experience: seeing the impermanent as enduring; seeing the insubstantial as having essence; blindly believing that what in truth can only bring suffering if we cling to it is a source of real and abiding happiness; and finding attractive and desirable what is from the highest perspective repellent – being caught up with the *viparyayas*, the 'topsy-turvy' views. These views prevent us from seeing the reality of our situation: that everything is, in fact, impermanent and insubstantial, and that true happiness cannot lie in any particular arrangement of conditioned phenomena – recognising the *lakshanas*. Whilst we are misreading reality and acting, communicating, and thinking on the basis of that misreading, the conditions do not exist for the Dharma Niyama processes to unfold. As soon as we cease to be caught up in those delusions to any extent, then the Stream of the Dharma begins to flow.

Above all, Spiritual Death means dying, in the sense of loosening our illusions about ourselves and giving up our self-oriented clinging – recognising that such clinging is psychologically counter-productive, ethically compromised, and, most fundamentally, existentially deluded. This stage is primarily practised through reflection on the true nature of reality, especially by considering the *lakshanas*, and through selfless activity that breaks down the fixity of self-attachment.

Once clinging to the illusion of a separate and enduring self lessens, then the non-egoistic motivations of the Dharma Niyama begin arising and it is the function of the **Stage of Spiritual Rebirth** to allow and encourage these to flourish. One does this by imaginatively connecting more and more deeply with Dharma Niyama processes, especially as embodied by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, learning to rely upon the promptings of the Dharma as a living reality rather than on one's own narrow self-interest.

In the Mahayana exposition of the Five Chief Paths, the fifth and final Path is spoken of variously as the stage of '**No More Learning/Effort/Practice**' or of '**Spontaneous Compassionate Activity**'. In his 'System of Meditation', Sangharakshita offers no corresponding stage, however he does speak of the meditation practice of Just Sitting, which clearly relates on lower levels to this highest stage. In his system, Just Sitting is a balance to each of the practices connected with each of the four stages. Such practices involve conscious, active effort, but that must be balanced by the cultivation of a receptive attitude, and this is the function of Just Sitting. It is nonetheless possible to see Just Sitting, at its highest pitch, as implying a culmination of Sangharakshita's system too, representing the 'Fifth Path', that followed by the Buddhas themselves – although it is, of course, a 'Pathless Path'.

In the schema of the Five Chief Paths, this final step is described in negative terms as the stage of 'No More Learning, Effort or Practice'. One who Goes for Refuge Effectively must make a continuous karmic effort otherwise they will fall back from any progress they have made, perhaps even losing connection with the Path altogether. A Stream Entrant, however, does not strictly speaking need to make an effort, because the force of their insight into the nature of things will itself inexorably carry them to Enlightenment, traditionally within seven lifetimes. However, if they do continue to make an active karmic effort to act beneficially, cultivate skilful mental states, and deepen understanding they may traverse the remaining steps of the path more or less quickly, even within one lifetime. But once the stage of No More Practice is reached at Buddhahood itself karmic effort is unnecessary, because from now on the Stream of the Dharma will unfold unfettered by any karmic residues.

It is not merely that karmic effort is not necessary at this stage, it is impossible, because the conditions that create Karma are no longer present: there is no sense of self-agency – one might say that the question of effort or of non-effort no longer arises. There is now no sense of a separate, permanent self at all, only pure unfolding processes on the level of the Dharma Niyama. Thus this stage is also spoken of in positive terms as the stage of Spontaneous Compassionate Activity. There is volition but that willing contains not the slightest trace of self-clinging. It arises naturally as a creative response to the needs of the situation. This is *bodhicitta*, not in

the sense of a consciousness that is motivated by *bodhi*, but here a consciousness that *is bodhi*.

We can now begin to see how ordination fits into the overall schema. When one Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels Effectively one is committing oneself to gaining Enlightenment by working with Karma and Dharma Niyama processes – and it is important to stress that it is a commitment to working with *both* sets of processes. This is what distinguishes Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels from goodness and humanity in general – highly desirable and worthy as these undoubtedly are. All ethically good people work with the forces of Karma, whether from habit, upbringing, or conscious moral conviction. The best in religion or in psychotherapy is concerned with helping people to become skilful moral agents. When culture is healthy and education systems are functioning well, they strengthen a sense of moral responsibility, especially by enlarging human sympathy. A good and just society is one that functions in accordance with the moral principles embodied in Karma.

All of this is very important and needs to be strongly supported and applauded. People in general need to be encouraged to develop a sense of themselves as moral agents within a universe where actions have proportional consequences for agent and others. People need to know that their own happiness and satisfaction lies in acting skilfully. They need, in other words, to be encouraged to practise the stages of Integration and of Positive Emotion. But this will not amount to Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels – or at best reflects Cultural Going for Refuge: influenced by but not committed to the Dharma.

Provisional Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels arises when there is at least a glimpse of Dharma Niyama processes – one sees for a while that there is a current within reality that will carry one beyond self-clinging towards Enlightenment. When one is *convinced* that there is such a current and has the psychological integrity to place one's energies more and more fully at its service, then one will Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels and that commitment will be effective, insofar as one will steadily move forward on the path. One will still need to complete the process of integration and will need to continue developing positive emotion – or, perhaps better, skilful mental states. However, what distinctively marks this as Effective Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is one's commitment to and active work on the stages of Spiritual Death and Rebirth.

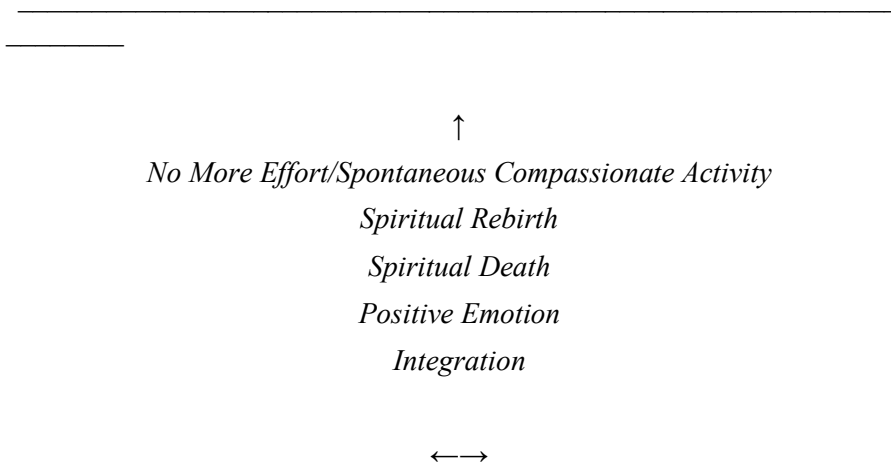
All this is crucial to the ordination ceremony itself. Its essence is the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels through the recitation of the Refuge formula and the witnessing of that act by one's Preceptor, thus ritually embodying one's spiritual commitment. But what is distinctive about this commitment is its implicit taking up of the practice of Spiritual Death and

Spiritual Rebirth in an effective way. We will see later how Sangharakshita wishes to see this explicitly embodied in the ceremony through certain refinements to the way the ritual is understood and carried out. But first we must explore one more key perspective to prepare us for a full exposition of the ceremony as Sangharakshita now sees it. We must look at the horizontal dimension of Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Life, because that too must be incorporated into the understanding and practice of ordination.

The System of Spiritual Life

So far we have looked at ordination in the context of the system of hierarchical stages, first expounded as 'The System of Meditation', but here understood as including all aspects of spiritual practice, both in meditation and outside it. Sangharakshita sees the elements of the system not only arranged hierarchically and sequentially as *stages* of the spiritual path, but also as *aspects* of Dharma practice, all of which must be engaged with at each and every such stage and thereby brought to perfection at the highest stages. When seen thus horizontally as aspects, rather than vertically as stages, they constitute the principal elements of the Dharma life that must be practised at each level, in a manner appropriate to that level, from the stage of Integration through to that of Spiritual Rebirth: they must be present in the practice of a beginner as well as in the activity of a Buddha.

Indeed, if they are not practised at lower levels it is impossible to engage with them with full success at higher. One must therefore at every step in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels – whether Provisional, Effective, or Real – be practising integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. To these must be added a fifth element, the correlate on the horizontal axis of the final stage of the vertical. The vertical Stage of No More Effort or Spontaneous Compassionate Activity corresponds to the horizontal aspect of Spiritual Receptivity, as Sangharakshita discusses it in the context of Just Sitting.



*Integration * Positive Emotion * Spiritual Receptivity* Spiritual Death *
Spiritual Rebirth*

Fig. 1: The System of Spiritual Life, Vertical ↑ and Horizontal ←→

Our practice at every level and in all activities of our lives must include each of these five: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. Inevitably the character of practice of each aspect will be different at each level: the higher levels will carry them deeper – one might even say that one only truly begins to practise them when Going for Refuge is Real and the Dharma Niyama conditionality has become dominant.

Each of these horizontal aspects achieves a new dimension of significance at ordination and a deeper commitment to their practice is implicit in the ceremony – and this needs to be made explicit in preparation for ordination and, once ordination has taken place, should be a major element in the connection between Preceptor and the one they have ordained. We need then to see briefly what each of these aspects means and how it relates to Effective Going for Refuge and the ordination itself.

Integration as an aspect of spiritual life is primarily a matter of mindfulness and recollection – of deepening exploration of the four dimensions of awareness, described in Sangharakshita's presentation of *samyak smṛti*: mindfulness of self (body, feelings, thoughts), of others, of nature, and of reality. Initially, integration is predominantly a psychological and ethical matter: fully acknowledging one's own inner processes and outer action and taking responsibility for the effect one has on one's own mind and on the world around. At this stage one is primarily concerned with recognising and working with the Karmic kind of conditionality on the basis of a growing sense of oneself as a responsible moral agent.

Once one Goes for Refuge Effectively one will be practising mindfulness more deeply, striving to remain consistently aware of the true nature of whatever one's attention is directed to: seeing it as impermanent, insubstantial, and incapable of providing permanent satisfaction. One needs especially to recognise that whatever arises is, 'Not me, not mine, not my self'. This of course should not be an alienated awareness – a dissociation from one's self-experience for unwholesome reasons: one's awareness should have become sufficiently integrated before one ventures too far into this kind of reflection. This represents developing integration at the level of Spiritual Death.

Integration is practised at the level of Spiritual Rebirth by remaining consistently aware of the larger context of the Dharma, both as transcending self-clinging and as a force or current moving through reality towards Buddhahood. If one is Going for Refuge Effectively, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha will never be too far away from one's awareness and will be increasingly integrated into it.

If one has not been practising Integration in its earlier, psychological and ethical, phases, one will not be able to develop it in the later stages of Spiritual Death and Rebirth. An effective presentation of the Dharma will introduce beginners to the theory and practice of integration and, from then on, it should be possible for each individual to deepen their experience of it in accordance with their own needs, interests, and opportunities under the guidance of Kalyana Mitras and other teachers. A key factor in success at this stage will be putting oneself in circumstances that support one's efforts, especially in terms of one's social environment, and engaging in activity that is in tune with one's aspirations.

The aspect of *Positive Emotion* consists in the cultivation of skilful mental states and the actions that flow on from them. In the early stages it is practised by learning about the principles of ethics, summed up in the Five Precepts, and discovering how to apply them in practice. This requires one also to be fostering the wholesome mental states that underlie skilful action, especially *maitri* and the other *brahmaviharas*, as well as faith in and devotion to the Three Jewels. The development of spiritual friendship and participation in Sangha are key aspects of this stage, especially through involving oneself, as much as possible, in the institutions and activities of the Spiritual Community.

Once the individual Goes for Refuge Effectively, Positive Emotion takes on a new dimension. *Maitri* becomes a matter of striving for self-transcendence, first seeing one's own self as equal with others and then subordinating self to *maitri* as a transpersonal force. One begins, in other words, to cultivate *bodhicitta*. The practical consequence is that one increasingly feels oneself to be serving something that infinitely transcends oneself, often as embodied in work to spread the Dharma – for many Order members this takes the form of work for the collective project that is the Triratna Buddhist Community. One will cultivate a sense of a duty to the Dharma, which will be felt as more compelling than one's own personal likes and dislikes.

Spiritual Receptivity is perhaps the aspect among these five that requires most exposition, since it has not been explicitly explored before in these terms. It essentially consists in an openness to the progressive trend in conditionality, whether arising in oneself or in the world around. One who is spiritually receptive responds to ethical virtue, to purer and more refined

mental states, and to insights and experiences that come from beyond self-clinging. Whatever individuals, symbols, images, or teachings embody or exemplify the progressive trend will evoke an answering appreciation, devotion, and emulation – something within oneself will resonate with the ideals encountered without.

Similarly, when impulses and experiences emerge within one that are the fruits of progressive conditionality, one will value and cherish them, without attachment. For instance, skilful actions will give one a sense of satisfaction and self-confidence and one may notice a certain smoothing of one's way in life. This karmic *punya* or 'merit' is to be accepted for what it is and noted as a spur to further ethical efforts. Similarly, when one experiences any degree of *dhyana* or other *samapatti* or positive experience in meditation, one recognises it as a fruit of one's efforts and as a confirmation of the progressive trend in conditionality. Finally, experiences of genuine self-transcendence, the fruit of Dharma Niyama processes, will be embraced wholeheartedly and one will give oneself up to that progressive current more and more fully.

Here what we need to work on is our *capacity* to respond. Spiritual receptivity needs to be consciously developed because we are often unaware that we even have a natural capacity for responsiveness to what is truly valuable as an innate possibility of our being. Usually it is our instincts and emotions, our likes and dislikes, albeit sometimes tempered by reason, that seem the only motivating force within us, but we have another and more integral faculty that responds to *qualities* rather than to the quantities that are the coinage of ordinary life. We experience this faculty at work in our communication and friendships, in our response to beauty in nature or art, and in the effect that noble or inspiring example has upon us. As I have discussed in my paper, *Re-imagining the Buddha*, this faculty for responding to value, whether in terms of Beauty, Truth, or Goodness, can be identified as 'Imagination' or the 'Imaginal Faculty'. It is this faculty that one is learning to identify and bring into play when working on spiritual receptivity.

In his talk on *The System of Meditation*, Sangharakshita speaks of the meditation practice known as 'Just Sitting' as a balance to each of the practices that typify each stage of the system.

And in all of these other meditations conscious effort is required. But, one must be careful that this conscious effort does not become too willed, even too will-full, and in order to counteract this tendency, in order to guard against this possibility, we can practise Just Sitting.

He speaks of conscious effort being counterbalanced by 'passivity, receptivity'. Just Sitting is allowing a space to open up in which all effort is suspended and from which can emerge something new and even unforeseen, for the progressive trend in conditionality always gives rise to something more and higher than that from which it proceeds and is, in that sense, necessarily unexpected. Sitting silently without expectation, simply watching what is happening and accepting it without either grasping or

rejection, this is the essence of the practice and it is the basic exercise in spiritual receptivity. It may be done in the context of formal meditation or it may be practised when sitting relaxing in an armchair, doing nothing. Sangharakshita even speaks of the value of boredom, since simply accepting one's lack of engagement and waiting, is the basis for deeper processes to unfold.

By the time someone is ordained, this natural capacity for responding to the progressive trend in conditionality should be a consistent element of their experience, identified as the vehicle of spiritual life. It should be given plenty of importance amidst daily activity and indeed should have become the principal guiding factor, present in all the other aspects of the system of practice, each of which, in its own sphere, also cultivates spiritual receptivity.

Spiritual Death as a stage in the hierarchical schema marks the point of transition from Effective to Real Going for Refuge, because it is on the basis of seeing through the illusion of a permanent and independent self that one enters the Stream of the Dharma, as Dharma Niyama processes become the dominant motivating power within one. However, one cannot generally make that transition unless one has done a great deal of work on this dimension of spiritual practice from the very outset.

From first engaging with the Dharma one needs to be learning its perspective on the nature of reality, especially in terms of *pratitya samutpada* in its reactive and creative modes, together with how it is played out in terms of each of the Five Niyamas, and of the Three *lakshanas*. But one also needs to be reflecting on how these apply to one's own life. In many cases this will be a spontaneous and natural engagement with issues that deeply affect one's very existence, but it will also be beneficial, gradually and carefully, to introduce more systematic reflection on such themes. A very good place to start is the Buddha's own teaching of the 'five facts everyone should often reflect upon', as recorded in the Upajjhathana Sutta in Anguttara Nikaya, V.57:

Whether one is a woman or a man, lay or monastic, there are five facts one should often reflect on:

1. *'I am subject to ageing: I will grow old.'*
2. *'I am subject to illness: I will get sick.'*
3. *'I am subject to death, I will die.'*
4. *'I must be parted from whatever I love and is dear to me.'*
5. *'I am the owner of my actions (karma), heir to my actions, actions are the womb from which I have sprung, actions are my companions, and actions are my protection. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, of that I will be heir'.*

Practising in this way one will be increasingly convinced that one must commit oneself to the Dharma and it will be easier to recognise what

ordination means – Effective Going for Refuge – and one will deeply feel that one must be ordained in order to make further progress.

At ordination, one is fully committing oneself to working with Karma and Dharma Niyama processes. All one's practice should include an aspect of Spiritual Death. One's daily meditation practice, to which one should be committed as a principal focus of one's endeavours, should especially include a strong dose of Spiritual Death. The Contemplation of the Six Elements, Recollection of the Nidana Chain, and Reflection on the Six Bardos are all practices recommended by Sangharakshita to deepen the experience of Spiritual Death and these, especially the former, should be engaged with from time to time on more intensive retreats. However, in principle, any practice can have this dimension and it is the duty of the Private Preceptor to work out with the person being ordained how specifically they are going to incorporate it in their regular meditation – as well as in other areas of life.

Spiritual Rebirth is the counterpart of Spiritual Death – with the latter one dies to the illusory self and with the former one is reborn to the emerging flow of Dharma Niyama processes, leading ultimately to Buddhahood. At ordination one begins to cultivate this stage very directly – and, of course, effectively, insofar as it becomes a living part of one's daily meditation and other practice. However, one cannot do so without considerable preparation and once more this aspect too should be represented at the earliest stage of involvement with the Dharma.

Connection with something that transcends our normal experience of ourselves is especially important because of the nihilistic emphasis of so much modern culture, from the perspective of which the idea of spiritual death can only seem like annihilation. If we do not have such a connection, our spiritual efforts are, at best, but the refinement of our own self-clinging. Yet such a connection should not be presented in a way that suggests some eternal god or other abiding essence. We need a connection with something that is numinous without being seen as 'noumenal' – mysterious, awe-inspiring, and supremely desirable, but not an unchanging metaphysical existent. The Buddha himself, together with the ideal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that represent his Enlightened experience, is the commonest and, for many, the most effective embodiment of what lies beyond our self-based understanding. We can understand him insofar as he was human and historical, and we can acknowledge that he passes our understanding. The easiest entry for most to an appreciation of the Dharma Niyama processes is through the Buddha. Some however will have a felt sense of ultimate values, beyond form and concept, with which they are able to connect as living realities. These are however still related to the Buddha, for they embody aspects of the Buddha's own Enlightened experience and are known to us through his life and teaching.

Beginners need to be introduced to the Buddha, to learn his history and incidents in his life, to hear of the special qualities that make him a Buddha,

to hear of his teaching, and to identify him through representations of him in statues and pictures. They need to learn to allow themselves to feel and express reverence and devotion to the Buddha and the archetypes that embody aspects of his *bodhi*. They need to experience a culture in the Triratna Buddhist Community in which such expressions of feeling are acceptable and even considered desirable, and are given appropriate form – again, this is especially important given the nihilistic and cynical cultural climate with which many will have grown up.

As people develop an imaginative connection with the Buddha and realise more and more deeply who he really is, they will Go for Refuge to him, taking him and what he represents as the focus and goal of their own lives. When this becomes effective, they can be ordained. At ordination they will take the practice of Spiritual Rebirth to a new level of depth and regularity, devoting themselves effectively to self-transcendence through openness to the Buddha and his Enlightenment. Their Private Preceptor will help them to do so systematically in their daily meditation in a way that is appropriate to them and, after ordination, will remain in continuing dialogue with them about how to progress further in this aspect.

Re-contextualising the Ordination ceremony

We can now examine the principal elements of the Ordination ceremony in the light of the wider context and of the vertical and horizontal axes of the system of spiritual life. We can thereby see how Sangharakshita now wishes us to understand the ritual and to carry it out. I will examine each of the elements in the Private Ceremony, rather than the Public, since it is these that require some re-contextualising. Naturally, whatever is said of those elements of the Private Ceremony that are also found in the Public can be applied to it. All other aspects of the Public Ceremony require no further discussion.

1. Training: The ordination ceremony is the culmination of a training that begins from the moment of contact with the Triratna Buddhist Community – if it cannot be said to go back even further to impulses and urges that brought one to that contact. From taking up practice for the first time within the Community, the individual will be working on all five aspects of the pattern of spiritual training: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. He or she will have been given the basic tools of understanding and practice to deepen experience of each aspect. Teachers, Kalyana Mitras, and friends will be encouraging them to see how each is best developed in the light of individual character, interest, and aptitude.

Once an individual asks for ordination, they enter the ordination training, under the guidance of Public Preceptors with the assistance of the relevant ordination team. This training focuses on educating them in the essence of the Dharma as presented by Sangharakshita and in the principles and practice of the Triratna Buddhist Order. At the same time, the ordination

team, together with their teachers, Kalyana Mitras, and friends, will help them work with the five aspects of the system of training in a way that is appropriate to them. When those Order members who know them best consider that they are Going for Refuge Effectively, they will recommend their ordination to the Public Preceptors, who then make the final decision, after consulting more widely among Order members. By the time someone is accepted for ordination, they will have formed a special connection with a Private Preceptor, who will play a leading part in the final stages of their preparation, especially as regards the five aspects, and who will conduct their Private Ordination when their preparation is complete.

2. Preparation for the Ceremony: Once someone has been accepted for ordination, a new phase begins. In the months and weeks before the ceremony, the Private Preceptor will be discussing more closely than ever with the candidate the way in which he or she is practising each of the five aspects of the system of spiritual training, helping them to clarify their understanding and apply themselves more effectively. The effect of the relationship should be to give practice in all areas of life a sharper focus and a finer cutting-edge. There should gradually emerge a broad agreement between them about how the Mitra will be practising once they are ordained.

Of course, this should come about through sensitive dialogue in which special care is taken not to cramp or confine, taking fully into account the realities of personality and circumstance. Such an agreement should have plenty of room for growth as the individual discovers more about themselves and as practice unfolds and circumstances change. The two will continue in close dialogue about all this for the first few years of ordination, five years being the rough and ready guideline for the *nissaya*³ period, during which the new Order member remains spiritually 'supported' by their Preceptors. During this time at least, all substantial changes to the pattern of practice should be made only after consultation with the Private Preceptor. Of course, the relationship should continue while they are both alive, if with less frequency of direct contact.

A major topic of discussion during this preparatory period will be how the Mitra is to practise Spiritual Death and Rebirth effectively, since ordination represents decisive engagement with these stages of spiritual life. Besides the application of these aspects to the details of daily life, the Preceptor and candidate will be trying to see how they can be practised in daily

3 *Nissaya*, 'reliance' or 'support'. In the monastic tradition, the newly ordained monk remains economically and spiritually dependent on their Teacher for five years, unless *nissaya* is formally renounced, as Sangharakshita was asked to do at his Sramanera ordination. Within the Triratna Buddhist Order, there is an understanding that for the first five years after ordination, a new Dharmachari/ni should keep in regular and close contact with their Private Preceptor, consulting them on all major decisions before they take them and especially keeping in touch concerning the progress of spiritual practice, obtaining their Preceptor's consent before making significant changes.

meditation, especially in the sadhana to which the ordinand will be ritually introduced during the Private Ordination Ceremony. Although the choice of sadhana finally takes place only during the ceremony itself, the Private Preceptor will be clarifying the basic principles of such practice, especially in terms of its significance as spiritual receptivity, death, and rebirth. And they will be ensuring that the ordinand understands and is ready to undertake the solemn commitment to regular practice of the sadhana implied by the ordination.

Although no choice is to be made at this stage, the mitra should be clear about the range of possible Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that Sangharakshita himself would like most Order members to meditate upon, so as to further reinforce the connection between the ordination and the lineage of spiritual life that comes to us through him. Although there are many other possible figures that are traditionally contemplated in many different ways, the cohesion and spiritual harmony of the Order will be greatly reinforced if all Order members share to a large extent a pattern of practice that comes from Sangharakshita, who is the source of all Order members' ordinations. Ideally, the great majority of Order members will gain an acquaintance with all or most of these archetypal figures over the course of their lives in the Order, so that the same spiritual forces are alive amongst us all.

Sangharakshita has authorised a core set of sadhanas for the Order, some of which he received from his Tibetan Gurus and some he has compiled from traditional sources. It is the sadhanas for the following figures that are principally available during the Ordination ceremony: Avalokitesvara (Two, Four, and 1000 armed), Manjughosa/Manjushri, Vajrapani, Green Tara, White Tara, Amitabha, Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, Vajrasattva, Akshobya, Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi, Vairocana, Prajnaparamita.

Whilst most new Order members will find their spiritual needs well fulfilled by choosing from this core set and by practising according to the iconography and formula established by the written sadhanas accompanying each figure, exactly what is done needs to be worked out in dialogue with the Private Preceptor, if necessary in consultation with the Public Preceptor. Some few Order members have, for good reasons, been given the practices of other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, from time to time, and others may be in future, and some have chosen to imagine the figure in other ways, not found in the Indo-Tibetan tradition (for instance, seeing Avalokiteshvara in the form of the Chinese tradition, as Kwan Yin). Nonetheless, it is desirable for the future cohesion of the Order that most Order members are subject to the same spiritual influences.

Not included among these figures are those in *yab-yum* or sexual union and those with animal heads or demonic in form, since Sangharakshita considers that these are too easily misunderstood and that the cultural circumstances today do not support their usefulness, in the main. Similarly, he is cautious about people taking on wrathful forms, certainly in the early

stages of their engagement with this kind of practice - at ordination, for instance, it is the peaceful form of Vajrapani that should be taken up.

To strengthen connections with him and his teachers, Sangharakshita would like all Order members to take up, whether at ordination or later, one or more of the main practices he himself received from his Tibetan Gurus and has practised extensively himself: the Green Tara sadhana given by Chetrul Sangye Dorje; the sadhana of the Four Armed Avalokitesvara and the Manjughosa Stuti Sadhana, given by Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche; the Padmasambhava sadhana given by Kachu Rimpoche, as well as the Vajrasattva sadhana from the *Tharpe Delam*, for which Kachu Rimpoche gave him the authorisation; and the Amitabha sadhana, based on his own vision in the Virupaksha cave on Mount Arunuchala, as described in *The Rainbow Road*⁴.

The precise details of the sadhanas aren't given in advance (though, fortunately or unfortunately, they may be readily available in various media). As far as possible, a certain mystery is maintained around the ceremony, which helps to establish an atmosphere of heightened sensitivity, and this includes exactly what practice will be given at the time of the ceremony. Though Preceptor and ordinand may discuss preferences and suggestions, in the end it is the Preceptor who chooses and he or she only do so in the Private ceremony itself, allowing space for spontaneous inspiration.

3. Spiritual Receptivity: The Private Ordination Ceremony usually takes place within the context of a retreat, whether short or long, which creates the right mood and atmosphere, often in a highly effective way. At some point in the retreat, the Mitra who is to be ordained will leave the shrine room where everyone else is meditating. They will leave alone and walk towards the shrine-room where the ordination is to take place. These few moments of solitude are often experienced as especially significant, as one savours the sense that one is taking this step entirely on one's own and by one's own choice. This reflective walk leads to the Ordination shrine-room, where the Private Preceptor awaits.

The ceremony opens with the making by the ordinand of the three traditional offerings of flower, candle, and incense, setting the mood of receptivity and reverence. Some verses of purification follow, further deepening this attitude, since true receptivity requires purity of body, speech, and mind. Negative karmic residues close one off from the progressive trend in reality.⁵

4 *The Complete Works of Sangharakshita*, vol. 20, p345.

5 In these verses there is reference to 'the Sacred Mantras'. Here 'mantra', in the first place, does refer to those of the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, one of which will be 'given' during the ceremony. However, Sangharakshita also considers that the term could be

The ordinand then requests ordination of their preceptor, once more expressing receptivity, especially in the sense of acceptance of discipleship, both in relation to the Preceptor and to his or her Preceptors, going back to the founder of the Order, Urgyen Sangharakshita, and ultimately to the Buddha himself.⁶ The formula is a traditional Pali one, again emphasising the ordinand's place as the recipient of a tradition. The exchanges that follow further reinforce the mood of receptivity, as does the continuing relative position of Preceptor to ordinand throughout the ceremony, the one very definitely leading and the other following: one giving, one receiving.

4. Going for Refuge: The recitation by the ordinand of the triple formula of Going for Refuge is the true heart of the ceremony. In a sense everything else could be dispensed with, since this in itself signifies the decisive transition from a Going for Refuge that is Provisional to one that is Effective – and seeking to become Real. This is the point, ritually speaking, at which the will of the individual is effectively aligned with the progressive trend within reality.

Going for Refuge has been very fully explored elsewhere so it requires no further examination here – lack of words, however, in no way represents lack of significance.

5. Undertaking the Ten Ordination Vows: The Ten Precepts – in the ceremony termed vows to emphasise the weightiness of undertaking them at this point – are the extension of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels into every area of life. They are, it might be said, what Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels implies.

It could further be said that the Precepts are another way of viewing the totality of the Dharma life. They thus correspond to the five aspects of the system of practice: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. In taking on the Precepts one is implicitly taking on the pattern of practice.

6. Witnessing and Confirming: The Preceptor witnesses the taking of the Refuges by leading their recitation. He or she checks that the ordinand has truly Gone for Refuge and in effect confirms that they have in a final exhortation, based on the Buddha's last words, *appamadena sampadetha* – 'with mindfulness, strive.'

applied to the recitation of the Three Refuges and the like that serve the same function of connecting one with the Buddha and his Enlightenment.

6 Ordinands refer throughout the ceremony to their Preceptor as 'Bhante' (m.) and 'Ayye' (f). Whilst these are the traditional forms of address used by junior to senior bhikkhu or bhikkhuni, by all bhikkhunis to all bhikkhus, and by lay people to all monks and nuns, the term is simply an honorific, more or less equivalent to 'sir' or 'madam' and has no necessary monastic connotation.

This too is well-worn ground: the witnessing by the Preceptor of the ordinand Going for Refuge is what makes it possible. Again, lack of explanation here should not be taken as minimising the importance of this aspect of the ceremony.

7. Commitment to a meditation practice:

At this point in the ceremony, a mantra is 'given', ritually connecting the ordinand to an archetypal Buddha or Bodhisattva as symbolising the goal towards which they are working.⁷ What is 'given' by means of that mantra is a link to a particular Dharmic personality, intrinsically bound up with the act of commitment that is at the heart of the ordination and explicitly working out the processes of Spiritual Death and Rebirth – for it is these aspects of spiritual life and practice with which Effective Going for Refuge distinctively engages and to which it commits.

We have already seen that training in the Triratna Buddhist Community, starting at the moment of first contact, should offer the individual the tools and guidance they need to develop naturally and appropriately in accordance with each of the five aspects of spiritual practice: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. In the months and weeks before ordination they will have been working with their Private Preceptor to focus their practice under each of these headings, both in meditation and out of it. In particular they should have developed a definite sense of what it means to let go of self-attachment, as well as a clear imaginative connection with the personality of Enlightenment, whether in the form of the Buddha or one of the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from the Order's core iconography that are manifestations of the qualities of *bodhi* – embodying the progressive trend in conditionality beyond all self-clinging or, to put it another way, the processes of the Dharma Niyama, functioning completely freely and spontaneously. If the figure is not the historical Buddha himself, it should be clear that whoever is being meditated upon is a manifestation or embodiment of the Buddha's own experience. It should be deeply understood and felt that whoever is being contemplated is not really different from the Buddha Shakyamuni since it is only through his Enlightenment that we have come to know the transcendental qualities that all embody.

Though the Preceptor and ordinand are likely to have discussed these matters over the weeks and months before the ceremony, there is a further chance to briefly discuss them again in the ceremony. Then the Preceptor will choose the particular mantra that seems appropriate, the ordinand

⁷ In addition to the recitation of the mantra in call and response, where time permits, sometimes the Private Preceptor may lead the ordinand in a short 'epitomised' version of the sadhana they will henceforth be doing, though this is not a necessary part of the ceremony.

repeating it three times after him or her, thereby ritually establishing the spiritual connection with the figure.

The contemplation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva is, very clearly, a practice of spiritual rebirth, which itself implies spiritual death. However that latter dimension needs to be more explicitly drawn out and reflected on within the context of the practice, whether through a stress on the *sunya* nature of the imagined presence or any other application of the *laksanas* to the experience. This too the Preceptor will need to bring into focus, to some extent during the ceremony but especially by ensuring further training later.

After the ordination, new Order members will be given a full introduction to their new sadhana and will often have the opportunity to go on special retreats for particular practices. It is worth emphasising at this point that contemplation does not necessarily mean *visualising* in the sense of seeing something with one's mind's eye – although for many it may, at least to some extent. The accent should be on experiencing the 'personal' presence of the Buddha or Bodhisattva, through whatever imaginative medium, and entering into a communication in which devotion and gratitude flow upwards and blessings and teachings flow down.

It is to be understood that in the ceremony one is committing to doing this practice faithfully on a more or less daily basis as the contemplative working out of one's effective Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels and therefore to effective spiritual death and rebirth. Once it is firmly established, after three or four years or so, it will be possible to take up new practices – indeed, Order members are encouraged to gain some experience during their Order lives of all the practices from the core set, especially those the Sangharakshita himself has practised deeply. However, the practice one takes on at ordination should remain the basic one, to be supplemented only in consultation with one's preceptor.

8. Initiation: Effective Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels as marked in the ritual of Ordination is the first step in a new life. One is effectively 'born again' as one who has shifted the emphasis of their life from the *samsaric* round to the progressive trend in reality, however far there may yet be to travel. This is not merely an inner change, but a change in public identity – which is of course more fully recognised in the Public Ordination Ceremony. This is truly a new beginning – entry into 'the family of the Buddha'. The whole ceremony then is an initiation – one might say, *the* initiation, there being no need for more since everything is implicit in it.

One has Gone for Refuge and that has been witnessed by someone who recognises what one is doing because they have done it themselves. That Going for Refuge has been worked out in the detail of life in terms of the Precepts, with their implication of the entire pattern of practice, and in terms of the specific daily meditation practice to which one is committing oneself. This is the basis for one's new life. The initiatory character of the ceremony is symbolised specifically by the giving of a new name that

expresses one's new identity. The new name itself will have a definite Dharma meaning – and it does not matter whether or not it relates to one's own character: it is not a 'personal' name, but one that signifies one's entry into a life that leads beyond the merely personal.

Because of the deep significance of taking on a new name as an enactment of the new life that one enters at ordination, the name cannot later be changed or discarded lightly without disrupting one's relationship with one's preceptor and therefore one's membership of the Order. If there seem to be compelling reasons to change the name, because of its significance in a particular culture or, more topically, because an Order member has undergone a sex-change, this can only be done in discussion with one's preceptor. It is not a matter of merely personal choice.

The unity of the Order lies in all its members having undergone and remained faithful to this initiation, understood in the particular way that our teacher, Ugyen Sangharakshita has taught us, as set out here.

9. Blessings: The ceremony concludes with the chanting of the well-known Pali blessings. In chanting these, the Preceptor expresses his or her strong approbation of what has happened and desire for the future well-being of the ordinand – and this is a final acknowledgement or witnessing of the effectiveness of their new disciple's Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. It is also a reminder of the karmic, even Dharmic, consequences of the highly skilful act of committing oneself in this way: as one spiritually dies more and more genuinely, so the beneficial forces of the universe will support and protect one, because one is aligning oneself with the progressive trend in reality.

Making the change

Although all that has been discussed above amounts to no more than a clarification of what has gone before, it should nonetheless make a major difference. To a greater or lesser extent, depending on individuals and circumstances, there should be a shift, gradual and subtle, in the way ordinations are understood and carried out and the way Preceptors work with those they ordain, along the lines indicated in this paper. The process of absorbing what this means must start with the Preceptors, both Public and Private. In effect all will have to retrain in what it means to be a Preceptor, in as much as far more will now be expected of them. Many will have to learn how to work much more closely with those they ordain, both before and after the ceremony. They will need to help them understand more clearly how to apply the principles of the Dharma to their experience and to work more effectively with the processes that are unfolding within them.

If we can put what Sangharakshita is suggesting into practice more fully, new Order members will get much more support and training than they have done in the past and that will surely make the Order much stronger.

Perhaps even more significantly, senior Order members who act as Preceptors will themselves need to train more fully and deeply so that they can face the spiritual challenge that is implied. They too will have to die spiritually far more deeply and really, so that they may experience themselves reborn in that stream of non-egoistic willing that is the *bodhicitta* – ultimately the only reliable basis for carrying out the responsibilities of a Preceptor.

Dharmachari Subhuti,
Maes Gwyn,
Wales.

'A supra-personal force or energy working through me': The Triratna Buddhist Community and the Stream of the Dharma

Dharmachari Subhuti

From Urgyen Sangharakshita

I am glad to see that Subhuti has now completed 'A Supra-Personal Force: The Triratna Buddhist Community and the Stream of the Dharma', the fourth and last of the series that began with 'Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma' and continued with 'Re-Imagining the Buddha' and 'Initiation Into a New Life'. Like its three predecessors, this paper grew out of Subhuti's discussions with me, and I commend it to the attention of all Order members, and urge them to make it the object of careful study.

This article, in Sangharakshita's phrase, 'rounds off the cycle of teachings' that began with Revering and Relying upon the Dharma, proceeding then to Re-imagining the Buddha, and Initiation into a New Life. Each of these attempts to follow through the implications of Sangharakshita's statement, in What is the Western Buddhist Order?,⁶ that the Order is the community of his disciples and disciples of his disciples, practising according to his 'particular presentation of the Dharma'. Like them, this paper emerges out of my conversations with him, exploring especially his understanding of the five niyamas, and is published with Sangharakshita's approval. This present paper explores the Dharma niyama at work in Sangharakshita's own life and experience and thereby shaping the institutions of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community.

Whilst it seems that this cycle may now be complete, the conversations continue....

The crux of the Dharma life is the transition from the mundane to the transcendental path – from the *laukika* to the *lokottara mārga*. Before that transition takes place, one is a *prthagjana*, 'a common worldling', dominated by the illusion that one has an independent and ultimately substantial self-identity. On the basis of this identity, one craves whatever appears to provide greater happiness and security and one hates whatever threatens or causes pain. Whatever experiences tend to reveal the impermanence even of that self-identity are ignored or controverted.

Once one enters upon the transcendental path, one becomes an *ārya*, one in whom this illusion of an ultimately real selfhood has been broken, if not yet entirely eradicated. Although the self-oriented motivations of greed, hatred, and delusion continue to arise, they can no longer dominate one's actions and are progressively eradicated as the path is traversed.

The transition from *prthagjana* to *ārya* is then, most essentially, a movement from a consciousness dominated by the illusion of an ultimately real self to one that has no such illusion – or at least increasingly less of one. This marks a difference in the motive force or power that fuels progress on the path of the Dharma. As a *prthagjana*, following the mundane path, the most important factor is the power of karma. One consciously subordinates one's ego identity to ethical and spiritual principles, recognising them as serving one's own best interests. In effect, one uses self-interest to slowly transcend selfishness, in accordance with karmic conditionality. On the basis of skilful action, mental states arise in which the element of self-clinging is progressively attenuated, eventually enabling one to see through its illusory and painful character.⁷

With that realisation, one enters upon the transcendental path, thereby becoming an *ārya*, in whom selfish motivations have ceased to be the chief drivers of action. Instead of self-interested desires, however positive, a stream of non-egoic volitions now arise. This flow of selfless impulses is no longer fuelled by the karmic kind of conditionality, but by processes arising under the heading of the *Dharma-niyāma*.

So much are our minds dominated by self-interest that it is quite difficult to imagine what that truly selfless mind might be like. Nonetheless, this is the Dharma's central claim: that it is possible to act, and act consistently, from a basis other than selfishness. This is what we are trying to achieve through our Dharma practice.

⁷ This paper assumes an acquaintance with three previous papers written by me on the basis of conversations with Sangharakshita: *Revering and Relying on the Dharma, Re-imagining the Buddha*, and *Initiation into a New Life*. Two other papers also touch on material implied here: *The Dharma Revolution and the New Society* and *A Buddhist Manifesto*. All can be found on www.subhuti.info.

Urgyen Sangharakshita himself describes, very beautifully and simply, an experience that seems to be of this kind. Writing to his friend Dinoo Dubash, on 15 December 1956, he tells of his visit to Nagpur in Central India a few days earlier, which had coincided with the tragic news of the death of Dr Ambedkar, the great Indian leader who just seven weeks before had led hundreds of thousands of his followers out of Untouchability into Buddhism in that very city. Once the shocking tidings had become known, waves of grief and despair had rolled through the multitudes of new Buddhists and it had fallen especially to Sangharakshita to try to rally them through meeting after meeting, talk after talk, often continuing late into the night. That story is relatively well known. However, what is of note here is the very unassuming, almost understated, account he gives of his own inner experience in his letter to his friend, written just a week later:

My own spiritual experience during this period was most peculiar. I felt that I was not a person but an impersonal force. At one stage I was working quite literally without any thought, just as one is in *samādhi*. Also I felt hardly any tiredness – certainly not at all what one would have expected from such a tremendous strain. When I left Nagpur I felt quite refreshed and rested.⁸

'An impersonal force'! It is safe to assume that what he means by this is that he was not motivated by self at all. No 'personal' interest drove him, but he nonetheless acted, and acted very effectively, giving people just what they needed.

Bodhisattvas and Arhats

The crucial transition in Dharma life is, then, a movement from a self-oriented to a selfless motivation. 'Selfless', of course, does not mean merely lacking in self: a kind of blank automaton. Selflessness has its own positive character, although not in terms easy for us to grasp. It seems that to the degree that one is selfless one responds spontaneously to the needs of whatever situation one finds oneself in, in a way that for the *prthagjana* may seem quite mysterious. We might describe the motive for such action as compassion, but that could be rather misleading. If it is compassion at all, it is quite different from the kindly concerns that we ourselves might feel. It has little or no trace of sentiment or pity: indeed, it is not truly an emotion at all. It is not even the positive extension of our own self-concern to include others, which is what we are cultivating in the mundane practice

of *maitrī*- or *karuṇā-bhāvanā*.⁹ It is rather a function of a fully mature awareness: a need is seen and responded to in the most appropriate way without any personal interest, simply as one might, without a moment's premeditation, pick up for someone something dropped from their pocket, spontaneously responding to what is objectively needed.

The early tradition, especially as found in the Pali Nikayas, speaks of this transition in terms of Stream Entry. It does not, however, stress its compassionate character, rather dwelling on the breaking of the illusion of a permanent self and the freedom and ease that that brings. The life of the Buddha himself is clearly one of compassionate action and there is much incidental material that stresses the importance, for instance, of *maitrī*.¹⁰ Later traditions, which eventually found expression in what is loosely characterised as the 'Mahayana', did wish to emphasise the compassionate nature of the Buddha, but did so by setting him apart from his own historical disciples and positing a separate path for those who chose to take him as their ideal. Such bodhisattvas were said to be motivated to become buddhas themselves for the benefit of all beings by the power of bodhicitta, which indeed is a term for a motivating force that is selfless – albeit, short of bodhi itself, still admixed with decreasing traces of self-clinging.

It appeared then to these later traditions that there were at least two kinds of Dharma goal: Arhatship, liberation attained for self alone without compassion, and Buddhahood, full and perfect enlightenment gained by means of the compassionate path of the bodhisattva. This however creates a problem. If this were indeed a valid distinction, it would require a selflessness that was not compassionate: the Stream Entrant would be someone who had decisively broken self-attachment but had no other motivations to replace egoistic desire: a blank automaton indeed.

In my recent conversations with Urgyen Sangharakshita, he has stressed again that he does not consider that there are two separate paths and goals. He suggests that we can discard the traditional Mahayana distinction as erroneous and see Entering the Stream of the Dharma as essentially the same as the Arising of Bodhicitta – even if this is not the way it is understood traditionally. When you Enter the Stream, the selfless

9 As opposed to their transcendental practice, when *maitrī* and *karuṇā* are without self-reference.

10 See *Majjhīma Nikāya*, Suttas 56 & 58, for examples of the Buddha's identification of his buddhahood with compassion. See also *Vinaya*, I.21, in which the Buddha enjoins his first disciples to go forth to teach the Dharma 'out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the profit, the bliss of devas and mankind'. Above all, there is the *Karaṇīyametta sutta*, *Sutta Nipāta*, v. 143.

motivations of bodhicitta arise. On this basis we can appreciate that the Arising of Bodhicitta and Entering the Stream are simply Real Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels considered under the aspects of altruism and of inner transformation.

We can then see the relationship between various key terms. The **Dharma** is, in its most important meaning, the way things truly are as a dynamic cosmic principle; the *Dharma-niyāma* is the kind of conditionality that comes into play when one sees the Dharma directly for oneself, especially by breaking free of the illusion of a separate selfhood; the **Stream of the Dharma** is that flow of Dharmic conditionality conceived as a spontaneous non-egoic force that carries one who has decisively broken the self illusion further and further into selflessness; the person who enters that stream is a **Stream Entrant**; **Bodhicitta** refers to the flow of ever-increasingly selfless mental states that arise in dependence on the Dharmic kind of conditionality; the **Bodhisattva** is one in whom bodhicitta has become the dominant force and who therefore responds selflessly to the deepest needs of others. **Insight** or *vipaśyanā* marks entry into the Stream of the Dharma and also, in this revised schema, bodhicitta becoming **Irreversible** – although, of course, the way this and other terms from the bodhisattva path are used here does not correspond in some important respects to their usages in developed Mahayana since the different systems of thought have evolved in different circumstances and cannot be correlated in an entirely satisfactory or consistent way.¹¹

It should be noted here that the term 'bodhicitta' – particularly when referred to as 'The Bodhicitta' – is a metaphor that is easily reified to imply an enduring metaphysical entity, existing independently of the individual within whom it arises, and thus similar to the '*ātman*' of Brahminical thought that the Buddha so explicitly and centrally denied. Indeed one often hears the term 'The Bodhicitta' used naively in that way by Buddhists, even within the Triratna Community. However, used carefully and correctly, it implies a dynamic process, referring to the stream of selfless mental states that arise on the basis of the Dharmic kind of conditionality, and is thus far from being an eternal metaphysical entity. It is now so widely used and carries such deep Dharmic significance for so many that it can hardly be eschewed. Its usefulness can be found in its emphasis on the altruistic character of those selfless states and on their 'non-personal' character: on their having nothing to do with egoistic volition. It does nonetheless need to be used with considerable care, with

11 c.f. Sangharakshita, *Going for Refuge*, also *The History of My Going for Refuge*, and *The Bodhisattva: Evolution and Self-transcendence*.

full consciousness of the dangers of metaphysical reification. I would suggest it should never be employed without close juxtaposition to more dynamic language that explicitly connects it with the principle of dependent arising.

Sangharakshita, then, does not accept the traditional Mahayana distinction between the two paths. But how did it ever gain currency? In line with more recent scholarly research, he considers that it arose gradually over the centuries, in response to a variety of factors. Whatever the historical forces that led to the distinction, Sangharakshita considers that its effect was to correct the one-sided emphasis of dominant currents in the early tradition, currents that especially dwelt upon the final ending of personal suffering and release from the cycles of rebirth that enlightenment brought. Risking an oversimplification of a complex and still rather obscure history, he argues that outside those dominant currents there persisted a sense that the Buddha himself exemplified something more than personal escape and that the Dharma-life was as much about developing selfless compassion as gaining the wisdom that liberates from suffering.

The dominant story was, however, sufficiently established and found such substantial justification in the commonly acknowledged oral tradition that it had to be accepted on its own terms. To assert a broader picture then required the formulation of a new story that there was an additional – and higher – goal: the attainment of *samyaksambodhi* for the benefit of all beings, rather than self alone, that is, by gaining enlightenment at a time and place where all knowledge of the Dharma was absent: by becoming a buddha. This was the path followed by the bodhisattva.

The Buddha Shakyamuni himself came then to be refashioned in terms of this distinction. His immediate disciples, as found in the Pali and other such texts, were reinterpreted as followers of the Arhat path, seeking personal release from the round of suffering. The Buddha himself was said to have reached the culmination of the bodhisattva path, to which he had committed himself countless lifetimes ago. The story emerged that he took the bodhisattva vow in the presence of the Buddha Dipankara and then, in life after life, systematically pursued the *pāramitās*, moving through the *bhūmis*, the stages of the bodhisattva path, until he had reached the tenth and final one. He was then ready to fulfil his mission of so many lifetimes, taking his last rebirth at a time when all trace of the Dharma had been lost: thus appearing as a scion of the Shakya clan in North India, two-thousand-five-hundred years ago, and there making the final step to *samyaksambodhi*. In other words, when he was reborn for the last time, he was all but enlightened.

Sangharakshita considers this to be more or less a 'just so' story, albeit a beautiful and inspiring one. Closer examination reveals many problems, both historical and in terms of the realities of the Dharma life. First of all, there is little or nothing in the Pali canon or other equivalent sources to support such a position.¹² Since those sources are the most historically reliable accounts we have of what the Buddha actually said and did, to go beyond their evidence is to stray into fiction.

Later traditions justified themselves with further 'just so' stories, arguing that the Buddha of the early texts had preached a lesser goal for people of more limited ability and that for those of finer spiritual quality he had revealed further teachings that are found in other sources, the Mahayana sutras. Many of these are, however, clearly of later composition, though they may contain older inspiration.¹³ It is important to stress that this does not mean that they are to be entirely dismissed, for many of them are of great spiritual loftiness and are consistent with the Buddha's message and they are thereby of considerable value. However, they are, strictly speaking, fictions. Of course, many a great novel contains more truth than much written history, nonetheless, their story about themselves cannot be taken seriously from an historical point of view and they need recontextualising in the light of the sort of critique that Sangharakshita is making.

The Buddha-to-be of the Pali canon is clearly an exceptional individual by any standards, showing perspicacity, intelligence, fortitude, and determination far beyond the ordinary. However, he presents himself as having had to search for several years for the way to enlightenment and as having had to conquer fear and discouragement and other mental defilements.¹⁴ He appears as very definitely human like us, albeit of unique quality. Moreover, he is never presented as showing, before his enlightenment, any concern to reach liberation out of compassion for others. All this was later explained away as a sort of act or show, as a kind of teaching device. This no longer carries much persuasion.

Besides the problems of evidence, Sangharakshita considers that the Mahayana version of the Buddha's career, if taken literally, invites a kind of fantasy spiritual life. It seems to suggest that one can consciously commit oneself to being reborn after many future lives, at a time and in a

12 See Bhikkhu Analayo, *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal*, Hamburg University Press, 2010.

13 For a representative example, see the exploration of the textual history of the *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā-sūtra*, an important early Mahayana Sutra, in Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna*, Univeristy of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

14 See, for instance, *Dvedhāvitaṅga Sutta*, MN19.

place where there is no Dharma, and then to rediscovering it and teaching it to others: to becoming a buddha. For Sangharakshita this presents a quite false picture of how buddhahood arises, encouraging the unwary to suppose that it happens, basically, by an act of egoistic volition. Nothing could be further from the case. Buddhas emerge within the dependently arising progression of conditions at the level of the *Dharma-niyāma*. These *Dharma-niyāma* processes become decisive precisely when ego-clinging is transcended. One is carried, so to speak, to buddhahood by what may be felt as an 'impersonal force', something like that which Sangharakshita experienced in Nagpur. As one lets go of self-clinging more and more fully, that 'force' carries one further and further – and where it carries one is not something one can decide by egoistic will or even with which one need concern oneself. It is 'a spirit that bloweth where it listeth' and we must simply let it blow.

The final problem with the traditional Mahayana story is that it seems to posit a path from Stream Entry that is devoid of compassion – an ego-transcendence that is devoid of selflessness. It should already be clear that this is a contradiction in terms.

We are left then with a picture that brings together the material found in the Pali and other early canons with the spiritual riches of the Mahayana perspective. The Dharma life does indeed liberate one *from* the tyranny of self, with all its suffering. But one is liberated *to* an increasingly rich and subtle awareness from which compassionate activity spontaneously flows. The Buddha's motivation was no different from that of his enlightened disciples, although clearly his human genius went far beyond theirs. Indeed, the preoccupation with the Buddha's special 'cosmic' function seems to have emerged somewhat after his time. Critical study of the Pali canon suggests that the early focus of the Buddha's teaching was simply on moving into the flow of the Dharma, that progression of non-egoic states proceeding according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality.

It is in this sense that we can speak of bodhisattvas and bodhicitta in the same breath as Arhats and Stream Entry; although we will need to be aware that we are combining these terms in a different way from that found in tradition – otherwise, we can appear to be rather simplistically conflating two different universes of discourse. This can especially cause complications when we are reading traditional texts or find ourselves in dialogue with Buddhists from traditional schools.

No doubt we are best advised to avoid getting caught up in this historical complexity as much as possible, especially by referring to the two key *niyāmas* for the Dharma life: the karmic and the Dharmic. In the end, we must come down to the practicality of transforming ourselves

through skilful karma so that we can decisively break through the illusion of a fixed self and let the spontaneous 'impersonal force' of the Dharma motivate us to respond to the objective needs around us. We need not concern ourselves with where that will lead us, for that is not a matter under the control of egoic volition. In other words, we simply need to get on with working with the karmic and Dharmic levels of conditionality. Of course, this is to be done through steadily working in a balanced way on integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth.

Who founded the Order?

Entering the Stream of the Dharma is the purpose of the Dharma life. So far we have learned that this takes place in dependence on the karmic kind of conditionality and that the Stream of the Dharma is itself a flow of dependently arising states, this time operating in accordance with the *Dharma-niyāma*. Those processes can operate temporarily upon us before we fully enter the Stream and are experienced then as the pull of *śraddhā* or faith, as moments of insight or of intense inspiration, or as spontaneous acts of selfless generosity. They start to flow decisively and irreversibly once one has seen through the illusion of a separate self and are characterised by an increasing selflessness, which can be referred to as 'compassionate', so long as this is not interpreted in narrowly emotional terms.

It is more difficult to say anything further about these processes, insofar as they transcend our normal experience. Since our own minds are usually dominated, however subtly and benignly, by self-interest, we inevitably interpret anything that is said about states arising under the *Dharma-niyāma* in terms of our own self-based experience, which cannot but miss their essential character. There is therefore something ineluctably mysterious about them.

It seems that such states may even have about them a touch of what we might think of as 'the paranormal'. Sangharakshita speaks of something of this kind in connection with the visit to Nagpur already mentioned, during which he felt 'as if I was an impersonal force'. Prior to that visit, he had been in Bombay, staying with a friend who was strongly urging him to stay on with him over the next few weeks for a meditation retreat. Sangharakshita says it would have suited him to do so, in some ways, and there was no immediate practical necessity for him to go. He could easily have accepted the invitation – but he *knew* he had to go.

How I knew this I was unable to say, any more than I was able to say *why* it was essential for me to be on my way. I did not hear an inner voice,

neither did I have a sudden intuition. It was simply that I knew, clearly and certainly, that *I had to be on my way*, and accordingly fixed my departure for 5 December.

Having departed for Nagpur, he says he felt

some satisfaction, even relief, that at last I was acting on the knowledge that it was essential for me to be on my way... though why it was essential I did not yet know.

That, of course, became fully apparent soon after his arrival, when the news was broken to him of Dr Ambedkar's death, late the previous night.¹⁵

It is difficult to know what to make of this, and perhaps one should resist trying. The most one could venture to say is that it seems that these Dharmic processes follow connections and laws that are not normally discernible. And it seems also that they have a creative momentum of their own, independent of the will of the one in whom they manifest. Something of this kind seems to be indicated in a letter Sangharakshita dictated for me, on 14 October 2011, in which he reflected upon his experience around the time he was establishing the movement. The letter contains the following deeply significant lines:

I may also say that in recent years, on looking back over the history of the FWBO/Triratna, I have been amazed at what has been accomplished. At the same time, I have felt, or rather seen very clearly, that it has not been accomplished just by me. It was as though a supra-personal energy or force was working through me, an energy or force for which, in a way, I was not responsible. I have given expression to this feeling, or realisation, in my poem 'The Wind', which I quote for your benefit.

The Wind

*A wind was in my sails. It blew
Stronger and fiercer hour by hour.
I did not know from whence it came,
Or why. I only knew its power.

Sometimes it dashed me on the rocks,
Sometimes it spun me round and round.
Sometimes I laughed aloud for joy,
Sometimes I felt a peace profound.

It drove me on, that manic wind,*

15 Sangharakshita, *In the Sign of the Golden Wheel*, pp. 336 — 9. For more on Dr Mehta, the friend mentioned, and his connection with Sangharakshita, see Kalyanaprabha's excellent notes in Sangharakshita, *Dear Dinoo*, pp. 119ff.

*When I was young. It drives me still
Now I am old. It lives in me,
Its breath my breath, its will my will.*¹⁶

This remarkable statement, and the poem that so aptly illustrates it, suggests that the Triratna Community, in Sangharakshita's own estimation, has not emerged from any egoistic or self-interested motives. It embodies the Dharma, it would seem, rather than any personal desire.

I want to consider all this much more closely, because for me it has always been of the greatest importance that the movement with which I am involved emerges out of and is animated by something more than noble ideals or the words of a dead master. I have given my life to this work, as have many others, because I have sensed that there is something more at its heart. I want to examine what that means more closely, basing myself on my recent conversations with Sangharakshita and his various writings and teachings. I believe that thereby I can better understand this deepest factor in my own life and, perhaps, better communicate with others about it – and I want to do that because it seems to me that a clearer understanding of what we are involved with in these terms can help all Sangharakshita's disciples work more effectively together – and it may be useful to other Buddhists too. However, I am immediately aware of a gap – a gap, one might say, of credibility.

This gap has two aspects to it: one is to do with the nature of what is being discussed and the language that is used to discuss it and the other concerns the relationship of the writer and reader of this article to Sangharakshita. Let me deal with the last aspect first. I write as a loyal disciple of Sangharakshita of more than forty years. As is more or less inevitable, I have had my own difficulties with discipleship at times and have not always had a smooth relationship with him, for reasons mainly to do with my own processes. However, I am now, and always have been, quite confident of his integrity, especially as regards his own Dharmic experience. Indeed, at times he seems to speak of very profound moments of insight in such an open, almost inconclusive way, as if he feels no need to categorise or theorise them, that they invite conviction. Often they are spoken of in passing, simply as part of the story he is telling, as with his account of his visit to Nagpur in 1956. I therefore do not feel the slightest need to question that he has experienced what he says he has experienced. What I shall say from here on is based upon this confidence. However, I

16 Sangharakshita tells me that this poem 'wrote itself', coming unbidden and complete in a way that few of his other verses have done. He thought of the first line only, and the rest of the poem followed without any conscious thought. He says it was something of a surprise to him, on checking it after he had written it down, to find that the metre and rhyme were all in order.

am well aware that others may not share it – and I cannot expect them to. I wonder what they will make of what follows, but I hope something useful will emerge for them, too.

The gap of credibility connected with the nature of the experiences and the language used to communicate them is more difficult to negotiate. Up till this point in this article, I have largely used language that could be described as 'philosophical': the language of conditionality, especially in its karmic and Dharmic forms. I have even suggested the need for quite a bit of caution in the use of the term 'bodhicitta', given its quasi-metaphysical resonance. However, in speaking of a 'force' or 'energy', we move into a different kind of discourse. In the cases quoted, Sangharakshita reports his own experience in quite careful terms, saying in 1956: 'I felt that I was not a person but an impersonal force', and in 2011: 'It was as though a supra-personal energy or force was working through me'. He 'felt' and it was 'as though': in other words, we are neither in the world of everyday fact nor in the realm of metaphysics. Sangharakshita is trying to convey in metaphorical, even poetic terms, one might say, what the experience was like.

This transition from the philosophical to the metaphorical is inevitable if we are to get any closer to the nature of experience that transcends self-clinging. The Dharma is, the Buddha says, 'unattainable by mere reasoning'.¹⁷ What is beyond the reach of reason can, he says, only be directly experienced by the wise, those who are capable of viewing things from a Dharmic perspective. But even if we are not wise, in this sense, we can still gain some glimpse of what that experience is like, by means of a faith-filled imagination. As I have discussed in previous papers, according to Sangharakshita, this is what prefigures wisdom on the part of the *prthagjana*. It is to this faculty of imagination that Sangharakshita is appealing in speaking of his experience here. Only with that faculty alive will we be able to jump the gap of credibility. And having that faculty alive requires suspension of the literal mind, whether in its dismissive mode or its more credulous, both of which assign a limited factual meaning to metaphors and symbols that point to deeper truths, albeit to different effect.

Some might argue that it is best to avoid all such metaphorical language and stick to the safe ground of *pratītya-samutpāda*. I personally have some sympathy with that point of view, because anything else offers

¹⁷ 'It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this Dhamma, Vaccha, is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.' *Aggi-vacchagotta-sutta*, MN72.18.

hostages to eternalistic misunderstanding, which certainly grates on my own sensibilities. However, failing to offer more itself invites a nihilistic interpretation. Sangharakshita says that we need a 'transcendental object' towards which we can orient our lives. We need that because our most basic way of perceiving and understanding the world is in terms of subjects and objects – however relative and constructed the Dharma may have taught us to know them to be. We cannot but think of, and more importantly feel, the Dharma in terms of the most basic building blocks of our experience – until we are able directly to see their relative character for ourselves. In order to slip through the gap between eternalism and nihilism, we need both a willingness to think critically about what we say, so that we avoid taking it literally, and a preparedness to imagine a 'transcendental object'.¹⁸

In speaking as he does of a force or energy that transcends the person, Sangharakshita is getting at the way a Dharmic motivation feels and especially the difference in the experience from our normal sense of willing and wanting. Most of the time we have a clear sense of agency: that we ourselves perform our actions – even if sometimes we might feel that we only did what we did because other people or our circumstances gave us 'no choice'. From a more critical perspective, we might actually cast some doubt on how much control 'we' do really exercise over our actions – even on who 'we' are. Nonetheless, for ordinary purposes that is certainly how we speak of and understand what is happening: 'I did that'.

We do of course have our irrational moments, when we 'don't know what came over us' or we get 'carried away' and repressed energies leak or burst out, quite against our conscious volition. We may experience moods and untimely thoughts, that don't fit the idea we have of ourselves. Taken to an extreme, all this may be considered pathological, especially if it leads to problematic behaviour from a social, even legal, point of view.

We have then the impression of being in control and that of being out of control: in or out of the control of our assumed ego-identity. But there is a third kind of experience, and this is the one that Sangharakshita is pointing to. There is then no element of selfish desire in our motivation and yet there is no sense of 'losing control'. It is as if we, as ego-identities, willingly allow ourselves to be moved by concerns that have nothing to do with our own personal, ego-based interests. Here we can best refer to the *Dharma-niyāma* kind of conditionality: volitions arising within the person but not personal in reference.

18 For a much fuller exploration of this theme, see Subhuti, *Three Myths of Spiritual Life*, www.subhuti.info.

This kind of experience is, perhaps, analogous to poetic or artistic inspiration. The true artist sets aside the literal mind and opens up to the dimensions of imagination, exercising that 'negative capability' Keats considered crucial to poetic imagination – something like the spiritual receptivity we have seen in Sangharakshita's system of practice. Words, images, sounds, appear unbidden within the imagination and will not be manipulated by the ordinary will.¹⁹ The artist learns to open up to these forces and to allow them to express themselves independent of his or her wishes. The *śamatha* meditator too exercises this suspension of the ordinary '*kāma-loka*'-based perception so that *rupa*- and *arupa-loka* experiences can unfold, as one journeys in the realms of *dhyāna*. One may then feel one is communicating with visionary figures that emerge in the midst of meditation, from which one may draw inspiration.

Aesthetic or meditative inspiration is, however, but an analogy, or at least a mundane variety of what Sangharakshita seems to be reporting. The artist's imagination, generally speaking, manifests within the karmic kind of conditionality – although the greatest may touch on something more. Feeling that one is not a person but an impersonal force or it being as if a supra-personal force or energy is working through one is surely something more than inspiration, however exalted. One is willingly subordinating oneself to motivations that do not have their origin in self at all.

It seems to me of the greatest significance for his disciples that Sangharakshita considers that the Order and movement were not founded by him alone but by non-egoic forces, functioning according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality. However, there is plenty of room for misunderstanding. If one takes the metaphor too literally one thinks of some divine being or cosmic energy 'channelled', so to speak, by Sangharakshita and others: the energy being one thing, Sangharakshita another. But this does not at all do justice to what is being communicated and we must look further at what Sangharakshita himself has had to say about his experience in this respect.

He has often reflected that he does not consider he was the best person to found the Order – indeed, he recently told me, with a wry smile, that he had come to realise more and more how unsuited by character he was to the task. Again he has often commented that, in a sense, he did not especially want to start something new: it would, he says, have suited him temperamentally to have lived out his life in a traditional monastery, fulfilling a traditional monk's tasks. But he saw a need and 'something in him' responded, something that was not personal or self-interested.

19 See note 11 above (page 9).

Sangharakshita himself has tended to think of what in the passages quoted he has likened to a supra-personal force or energy as more like a consciousness beyond his own. He stresses that the language of a force or energy, especially one that is spoken of as 'impersonal', can lead one to think of a cold or mechanical process. Of course, to speak of a consciousness greater than one's own can suggest possession by a god or spirit. But he believes that the experience of transcending self-attachment is more adequately expressed in that way: as he has said, to think of something as 'impersonal' is to think of it as 'sub-personal', whereas what we are referring to is something 'supra-personal' – and we get closer to what that might mean when we speak metaphorically of a larger consciousness working through our own more limited, personal one.

Speaking in terms of a supra-personal consciousness also mitigates the strong tendency to appropriate even Dharmic experience to egoistic ends. As we have noticed even in our own circles, there can be an inappropriate over-concern with calibrating one's attainments and pronouncing claims to Stream Entry or the like. Sangharakshita goes so far as to say that it is not helpful, or even strictly correct, to speak of oneself as a bodhisattva: better to think of 'participating' in 'the Bodhisattva' or allowing what appears as that supra-personal force or energy to work through one. Even what has been said here about Sangharakshita's own experience of himself as an impersonal force or reflection that it was as though the Order and movement have been founded through him should not lead us to speculate about where to place him on this or that spiritual scale. He is simply giving a kind of poetic expression to his impression of what had happened to him. He felt it was *as if* a consciousness greater than his own was working through him.

From this perspective, we can better and more deeply understand the meaning of the so-called 'archetypal' buddhas and bodhisattvas. They are a way we can imagine and experience processes arising on the basis of the Dharmic kind of conditionality, beyond the personal, yet appearing as personified. It is these mysterious processes that have, according to Sangharakshita, been the major inspiration in the founding of the Order. And that sheds light on what Sangharakshita means when he likens the Order to, even identifies it with, the eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokitesvara. He says of that identification that it is 'Not just a manner of speaking, it's not just a figure of speech. We should take it very seriously, even take it literally'.²⁰

20 *Looking Ahead A Little Way*, talk to the International Convention of the Western Buddhist Order, 1999: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=194>

It should go without saying that, in discussing these experiences, Sangharakshita is not at all making antinomian claims, either for himself or for the Order. Indeed, the very reverse. One senses that Sangharakshita says these things in all humility, as a disclaimer rather than a claim. The fact that it was as though the Order was founded through him by forces that transcend him as a mere person does not imply that he is perfect and that all his actions are by definition beyond appraisal. Far less does it suggest that Order members are always motivated by trans-egoic inspiration or that the Order collectively is always necessarily a bodhisattva Sangha. All too obviously, that is not the case. However, it is of the greatest significance that it was founded, in Sangharakshita's own estimation, by what he can best describe as something like a supra-personal energy or force or even consciousness working through him, however much its members may fail to live up to that initial momentum. It was founded, in other words, by processes conditioned according to the *Dharma-niyāma*, by 'bodhicitta' – indeed, therefore, by the Dharma.

Not only could we say that those forces gave the Order birth, their cultivation and service is its meaning and purpose. Individual Order members can work on themselves by their participation in the Order, so that they enter the Stream of the Dharma, thereby unleashing non-egoic motivations, arising according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality – motivations that may to them appear as if they are a supra-personal force or energy working through them – even a supra-personal consciousness or bodhisattva. In the service of that creative energy and under its guidance, they can then, each and every one, together allow the Dharma to transform the world. This is why the Order exists.

Processes arising according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality founded the Order, so Sangharakshita in effect says, and the Order's meaning and purpose is to enable those processes to transform the world by the efforts we make, individually and yet collectively, to enter the Stream of the Dharma. For all our many failings, I am myself completely confident that the Order does embody, to a greater or lesser extent, those processes. There are among us enough who do genuinely try to serve the Dharma as a living force by letting it work through them, and individuals and institutions in general are sufficiently attuned through kalyana mitrata to such sufficiently inspired and consistent individuals, for the Triratna Community as a whole to embody to some degree the spirit of the eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara – and to embody it quite literally.

The conditions for bodhicitta

How could that Dharmic force or energy come to work through an individual? Even more to the point, how could it come to work through a community of individuals, a Sangha such as the Triratna Buddhist Order? If we can understand this better then we can shape our own lives more effectively to that end, and we can see better how to develop our own collective life: our institutions and common culture. That would enable the Order and movement to continue to embody the Stream of the Dharma even after Sangharakshita, the one through whom it first manifested, has gone from our midst.

Let us start by looking at Sangharakshita's own experience. Perhaps his feeling that he was 'an impersonal force', as he put it after his visit to Nagpur in 1956, was not unprecedented in his own life. However, he does say in his letter to Dinoo Dubash, 'My own spiritual experience during this period was most peculiar' – in other words, it was strange or unusual, even very special. What were the conditions in dependence upon which that special experience arose?

We must start with the most obvious condition: his many years of deep study and practice of the Dharma and his penetration into its true meaning. He had, in his own words, 'realised I was a Buddhist and always had been one', at the age of sixteen, fifteen years previously, in a flash of *samyag-dr̥ṣṭi* awakened upon reading the *Diamond Sutra*.²¹ Since then, the Dharma had been his central and deepening preoccupation. He had studied assiduously what Buddhist texts were available to him in English and had reflected constantly upon the Buddha's teachings. His study and reflection had borne fruit in many articles and poems, but especially in *A Survey of Buddhism*, a work of magisterial depth and comprehensiveness, that was even then making its way through the press.

He not only studied the Dharma, he had actively tried to realise it. He had practised meditation regularly and systematically for twelve or more years, with considerable success, and it is noteworthy that within a few months he was to start a particular kind of meditation practice, one he would now place under the heading of 'spiritual rebirth', after receiving initiation into the *sādhana* of Aryatara from the great Tibetan guru, Chetul Sangye Dorje. Indeed, he had arrived in Nagpur from Bombay, where he had been staying with his eccentric friend, Dr Dinshaw Mehta, whose contact he had valued partly because of the emphasis he gave to receiving 'guidance' from sources beyond the ego – although Sangharakshita did not accept that Dr Mehta's own guidance was necessarily of such a kind.

Nonetheless, his own meditation and spiritual experience had benefited from the connection.

Of course, meditation was part of a general practice of mindfulness and of ethics, on both of which he had placed much emphasis. In addition, he had regularly engaged in devotional practices, keeping a shrine and reciting puja, giving expression to and developing his strong feelings of gratitude to the Buddha, faith in his Dharma, and commitment to his path. All the while, he had cultivated his aesthetic sensibility, especially through reading and writing poetry, as well as by such engagement with literature and the arts as was possible to him, living as he did in the foothills of the Himalayas. Summing up, one could say that he had gone for Refuge to the Three Jewels more and more effectively, in terms of direct efforts to transform himself through conscious Dharma practice. This then could be spoken of as the first cluster of conditions in dependence upon which that experience of self-transcendence had arisen in Nagpur.

Another set of conditions can be discerned that is the natural extension of the first. The thirty-one-year-old Sangharakshita who arrived in Nagpur on that fateful morning had been serving the Dharma ardently for the past six years, since his teacher, Ven. Jagdish Kashyap, had left him in Kalimpong with the injunction to 'Stay here and work for the good of Buddhism'. Overcoming many obstacles, principally put in his way by fellow Buddhists, he had established a Dharma centre, the Triyana Vardhana Vihara. In addition, he had engaged in much literary work in the service of the Dharma, including the editing of an occasional magazine, *Stepping-Stones*, and the *Maha Bodhi* Journal, to both of which he contributed many articles and other material. And he had begun his preaching tours among the Dalit followers of Dr Ambedkar, principally in Maharashtra State. Above all, his memoirs reveal him as befriending many people and gathering together as many as he could to practise the Dharma, performing what Acharya Asanga, in the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, calls a bodhisattva's 'Act of Gathering' – *gana parigrha*.²² He had started to create a network of contacts that was the germ of a Sangha of disciples – the precursor to the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community.

A third factor supported his intensive personal Dharmic practice and his service of the Dharma. He had, for many years, been living a highly disciplined Dharma lifestyle, based on renunciation. As soon as he could leave the British Army (indeed, slightly before he was officially discharged), he went in quest of circumstances that would express his commitment to the Dharma. He lived for a while as an Anagarika, a

22 Trans. Mark Tatz, *Asanga's Chapter on Ethics*, p.56, Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.

homeless wanderer, and in 1947 he took ordination as a shramanera and then, in 1950, as a bhikshu. So far as he could, he kept the essential principles of the monastic life, even to begin with going on the traditional alms-round, to the astonishment and delight of the Buddhists of Kalimpong, the small Himalayan town where he lived at that time. He gradually built for himself a way of life that enabled him to practise the Dharma as fully as possible. It was, above all, a lifestyle based on renunciation and he dwelt very simply with a minimum of possessions, sometimes with barely enough money to pay his rent.

These three sets of conditions were present when he arrived in Nagpur: his intensive Dharma practice, his service of the Dharma, especially through his active engagement with people, and his renunciant Dharma lifestyle. Shortly after he stepped down from the train, he learned that Dr Ambedkar had died during the previous night and at once realised the enormity of his people's tragedy, especially in that city, where the conversion had taken place so recently with so much inspiration and hope. The intensity of the need of so many thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people, simply pulled him beyond himself. One could say that his own resources were quite inadequate to the task of rallying people in their hour of crisis. But something else came through and he became the vehicle for an 'impersonal force' – or as he later, and better, puts it, 'a supra-personal force or energy' that worked through him.

These three major elements have continued to characterise his life and work, indeed have been more fully and clearly expressed as time has gone on. And thereby the Triratna Buddhist Order has been founded 'through' Sangharakshita and has grown and flourished with this inspiration.

The bonds of self

How do these three sets of conditioning factors of Dharma practice, Dharma service, and Dharma lifestyle contribute to *Dharma-niyāma* processes coming to work through individuals? To understand this more clearly, we need to examine further what it is that must be transcended, for one might say that the major issue is not getting those processes to work through us – it is getting out of their way. What prevents the Dharma from expressing itself through us is our own self-attachment and it is the initial purpose of Dharma practice to go beyond that by recognising the relative nature of our selfhood.

The basic structure of ordinary consciousness is focused on self. It is not merely focused on self, but driven by the self's needs to survive, thrive, and be perpetuated. The notion of self is, however, a construction. It appears to us to refer to a stable and enduring reality that 'owns' our

perceptions and actions, yet it corresponds to no discoverable referent. It is simply the most dominant of the workable abstractions or generalisations that our mental processes form out of the chaos of our experience.

This reduction to order is actually very necessary from the point of view of our survival. Without this facility for interpretive simplification of experience, it would be impossible to process what we perceive and we could never come to any effective response to it. However, having reduced perceptual chaos to order, we assume at a preconscious level that these abstractions have a reality independent of the perceiving situation and we build our lives upon that assumption. In particular, we unthinkingly act upon our sense that there is a real and enduring self, existing 'from its own side', that is the owner of our experience and actions. For most everyday purposes, this assumption is unproblematic. However, according to the Buddha, it is the ultimate source of our ordinary suffering and of our more fundamental lack of fulfilment.

Buddhist tradition attributes this fundamental self-orientation to habits carried over from previous lives – indeed, it is clinging to self that is said to drive the process of rebirth. This, of course, offers no explanation of how that self-attachment came into being in the first place. One could, however, venture an evolutionary explanation. As species evolved through natural selection, an awareness that could include a sense of a distinct self had definite advantages in terms of an organism's adapting to its environment. From that ability to identify self, or simultaneous with it, emerged a sense of time and therefore the ability to learn and to plan – all in the interests of that organism's own survival. The storing up of knowledge that self-awareness made possible and the collective sharing of such knowledge through culture greatly increased the adaptability of *Homo sapiens*, the only species we know of whose members are capable of true reflexive consciousness.

From this point of view, our self-consciousness has evolved as a tool of the organism's survival because it has allowed human beings to adapt to a very wide range of environments and to mould their circumstances to that end. The assumption of a self is inextricably bound up with the organism's deepest and most primitive instincts to survive and thrive. It emerges out of those instincts and it exists to serve them.

In the final analysis, it doesn't much matter how we account for it: Buddhists are enjoined by the Buddha not to concern themselves excessively with origins, lest that distracts from the main issue, which is the resolution of our deepest problems. Whatever its aetiology, the fact is that we do have a strong sense of a separate and enduring selfhood to which we are deeply and primitively attached. And that self-attachment

sooner or later becomes a problem. It is a problem because it brings us into conflict with reality itself, which is constantly thwarting, threatening, and ultimately destroying self-identity – and of course it is this self-attachment that is the fundamental basis for all social discord and violence. This inherent conflict with reality breeds a deep sense of insecurity and even fear, which can become overwhelming when the true nature of our existential position becomes unavoidable. This whole existence can seem a futile persistence in suffering that inevitably ends only in extinction. It is as if the more self-awareness develops the more pointless and painful does it all become.

The Buddhist perspective is that, not merely is this self-attachment the basis of our pain on every level, but it holds us back from a quite different kind of consciousness, one that is not based on self-clinging, embracing wholeheartedly the principle of conditioned arising. This different kind of consciousness is intimated at first by moments of rising above division and conflict through the experience of friendship, beauty, moral nobility, understanding, or of spontaneous 'mystical' transcendence over self-clinging. In these 'intimations of immortality', we realise the inadequacy and essential falsity – the *dukkha* – of our routine consciousness.

Easy as it is to say, perhaps even to see, that self-clinging limits us, it is not at all easy for us to break free of it. This is because its roots lie below the threshold of awareness. The value of the evolutionary perspective on the origins of self-consciousness is that it emphasises its instinctive character, which can easily be masked in ordinary life. A psychologically well-adjusted person who is reasonably positive emotionally hardly experiences themselves as essentially self-oriented, especially if they live in economically comfortable and politically stable circumstances. A healthy person accommodates self-interest to the interests of others so that there is little or no discordance. Under these circumstances, one can then enjoy a decent and peaceful life without encountering in any striking way one's own fundamental selfishness. One can be generous and convivial with friends and neighbours, care lovingly for one's family, and contribute responsibly to society through one's work and even one's charitable activity – and yet, at root, deep and strong self-attachment may still dominate, becoming obvious only when there is a serious threat to pleasure and security.

We can more easily recognise that fundamental self-clinging when it manifests in painful mental states or in socially disruptive forms of behaviour, such as violence of word or deed towards others or misappropriation of others' resources. Greed and hatred in all their forms, however crude or refined, are the primary categories of overtly egoistic

response, according to basic Buddhist teaching, together with ignorance, in the sense of turning awareness away from whatever threatens identity.

So deep is our self-centredness that it is structured into the very way in which we organise our experience. We quite literally see the world as arranged around us, interpreted from our own point of view. I am writing now from my point of view: you are reading from yours. The transcendence of this entirely instinctive, even natural, self-orientation is the task of the Dharma life.

Unfastening the bonds

We return then to the way Dharma practice, Dharma service, and Dharma lifestyle provide the conditions that will break through this deep instinctive habit. On this basis we can see what Sangharakshita's present recommendations are to his disciples under each heading.

Unfastening the bonds by Dharma practice

Formal Dharma practice, in all its diverse forms, involves making systematic and conscious efforts to change the current of one's volitions and their expression in words and deeds. Under a variety of headings, in a number of aspects of life, and through a range of techniques and teachings, one cultivates more skilful motivations and clearer awareness. Mental states then emerge, in accordance with the karmic kind of conditionality, within which self-attachment has been loosened. Such states are progressively more pliable, more able to take in a fuller picture and to respond to needs beyond those of self. Such a mind is less and less reactive and more and more spontaneously fills with love, compassion, and sympathetic joy. One is moved increasingly by powerful feelings of faith in what transcends self. This phase of practice, working with the karmic kind of conditionality, comes under the heading of the cultivation of *śamatha*.

Despite this growing refinement and positivity on the basis of karmic conditionality, however, the essential underlying structure of self-clinging remains. Something more is needed if that is to be undone so that *Dharma-niyāma* processes can be unleashed. We need consciously to cultivate *vipaśyanā*, insight into the unreality of our sense of self and the *dukkha* that inevitably accompanies our clinging to it. At the same time, we need to attune ourselves to what then arises, so that we can joyfully allow the Dharma to work through us.

What Dharma practice does, in effect, is reverse the process whereby self-clinging expresses itself in our mental activity and behaviour. There is

a causal chain that begins with that instinctive complex of self-attachment, buried deep as the mind's fundamental structure. That then shapes our mind's functioning, forming every state that arises in service to its own interests. Those mental states themselves then drive our actions. Thus there is a movement from the root structure of ignorant self-attachment, known in basic Buddhism variously, for instance, as *avidyā*, *āsrava*, or *anuśaya*, to mental activity based upon it, and then to verbal and bodily behaviour that gives it expression.

Our Dharma practice takes us in the opposite direction, by way sequentially of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*. First we apply *śīla* to our behaviour, trying to bring it into conformity with the precepts. This then modifies, under the karmic kind of conditionality, the way our mental states emerge, so that they are clearer to us and more integrated and therefore more amenable to our conscious influence. We can then more successfully practise *samādhi*, directly cultivating skilful attitudes of mind, and thereby bringing about new mental states, by means of karma, that are far more finely spun, much more nearly attuned to the way things truly are. On this basis, we can successfully practise *prajñā*, so that we can decisively see through the underlying tendency of self-clinging, recognising it as essentially a relative construct that has no necessary reality. We can then gradually eliminate every vestige of its expression in our lives.

How does Sangharakshita recommend that we put this into effect in our Order and Community? I have myself set out in recent papers his current thoughts on the subject of Dharma practice within the Triratna Community, drawing on my conversations with him, and there is little need here for further exploration.²³ Perhaps it is only necessary to call to mind his system of spiritual life, bringing together as it does, horizontally and vertically, the five factors of integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth.

Through this system, our Dharma practice will take us progressively beyond self-clinging, allowing that 'supra-personal force or energy' to work through us too. We simply need to make sure this schema is widely and well understood and to encourage all who involve themselves with the Triratna Community to put it into direct and systematic effect. Especially we need to make sure that those being ordained are practising it effectively, in particular that they are committed to working on the dimensions of spiritual death and rebirth that mark the transition from the karmic to the Dharmic kind of conditionality.

23 See footnote 2 on page 2.

Unfastening the bonds by serving the Dharma

One might think that Dharma practice was enough to break the bonds of self – and indeed it may be, if it is understood sufficiently deeply and practised with sufficient intensity. The problem is that one's practice of the Dharma can simply become the subtle expression of the underlying pattern of self-clinging. One can create for oneself a kind of private world, perhaps one of great loftiness, beauty, and purity, filled even with a degree of understanding. Yet the boundaries of that world may be quite restricted, insofar as it expresses a refined self-identity, not one transcended. Unfortunately, 'spiritual' types who live in such a world are many people's ideal of what a religious life should be like, even of a Dharma life.

Formal Dharma practice is certainly a necessary condition for breaking through the self-based structuring of consciousness, but not a sufficient one. That structure is, after all, inherently defensive: its very function is its self-perpetuation. As soon as a breach occurs in its protective enclosure, a fresh line is fortified. It is, indeed, remarkable how quickly and effectively the mechanism operates: sometimes all too obvious to an observer, but not at all easy for the person concerned to recognise. A factor is needed, then, that arrests that instinctive defensive mechanism, a mechanism that can even be at work in our formal spiritual practice.

We need to engage with something that orients us beyond ourselves to what transcends our self-clinging. This of course should be a component of formal Dharma practice. In Sangharakshita's system, spiritual rebirth is the heading under which this kind of practice is to be found: the recollection of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and the contemplation of their qualities. However, few are able to connect with that trans-egoic dimension by this means with an intensity sufficient to wrench them truly out of themselves. Such contemplation by itself very easily becomes a form of aesthetic indulgence, or at worst a kind of superstitious escapism.

One needs to give up one's self-clinging in a very practical and concrete way. The activities of each day need to embody the giving up of self to something more. Everything one does must have a larger meaning and serve a greater end. One needs to serve the Dharma.

What then does it mean, to serve the Dharma? It means engaging in activity that contributes to the arising within the world of that supra-personal force or energy of bodhicitta, bringing the possibility of the final resolution of all suffering. One is serving not merely an idea, but the highest potentiality within life. Whatever one does, whether it be directly teaching the Dharma, earning money for Dharma work or in other ways providing the practical basis for it, or alleviating suffering in more

conventional, 'charitable' ways, one will be striving through that work to bring *Dharma-niyāma* processes into effect.

We should not interpret service of the Dharma in too abstract a way. Serving the Dharma always means serving other people, for there is no Dharma apart from people. The Dharma stream that begins to flow once we die spiritually and are reborn consists of a dependently arising, spiral chain of selfless mental states that encompass and respond to the needs of living beings. The Dharma is inherently compassionate.

While all service of the Dharma is ultimately service of other people, not all service of other people is service of the Dharma. This is a difficult point to clarify, because the same set of actions could express or not express Dharma service: it is, in other words, a question of attitude and perspective. For instance, good parents will sacrifice their own immediate interests to the needs of their children – in India, I have known parents who deprived themselves of food so that their children could eat well and get a good education. By any standards, such behaviour is highly laudable. It may actually represent something of genuine self-transcendence, but most usually it is, in all honesty, a kind of self-interest, because one has included one's own offspring in one's identity – no such sacrifice would likely be made for others' children.

Much charitable activity emerges from an imaginative identification with the sufferings of others, putting oneself in their place. From the Dharmic point of view, this kind of positive extension of one's sympathy to others is very much to be encouraged, both for the direct effect it has on those in need and for the karmic effect it has on the doer. Indeed, this is what the 'mundane' practice of *metta-bhāvanā* is about. When one sincerely works to help others, one is performing a skilful act that will modify the way in which one's own mind unfolds in accordance with the karmic kind of conditionality. Highly meritorious as this is however, it is not, in itself, service of the Dharma.

We serve the Dharma to the extent that we understand the Dharma's full significance as the truth about the way things are and as the dynamic principle that is ultimately the only way that suffering can be relieved. In other words, we can only truly serve the Dharma to the extent that we have realised it. It follows then that when we meditate, study, and reflect upon the Dharma, we serve the Dharma. On the basis of our understanding we do whatever we can to bring that dynamic principle into effect in the world, whether it be by teaching the Dharma to others, working within the institutions of the Sangha, or helping people with their most immediate sufferings – or sacrificing ourselves so that our children get a good schooling.

Sangharakshita offers a note of caution on this topic. Relieving material sufferings, such as hunger, disease, or social exclusion, is highly meritorious in terms of the karmic kind of conditionality, and may be a means of bringing the force of the *Dharma-niyāma* into play and therefore of serving the Dharma. Nonetheless, there is a very great need for spreading the Dharma, in the most direct sense, and for building the institutions of the Sangha, so that many people may have the circumstances that will enable them to practise the Dharma. After all, there are many people of good will who can do charitable work, but there are relatively few committed Buddhists to serve the Dharma – and even fewer members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, who are fortunate to have such a clear and effective presentation of the Dharma to offer.

It is the Dharma that transforms charitable work so that it becomes the means of connecting with the real solution to suffering. For this reason, Sangharakshita has always stressed that he would like the major efforts of as many Order members and mitras as possible to go into service of the Dharma in this sense.

Unfastening the bonds through a Dharma Lifestyle

Once more, one might think that active Dharma practice and service of the Dharma together are enough and that there is no need to address separately the question of a Dharma lifestyle. However, even these two combined can easily become forms of more or less subtle egotism, simply tacked on to an otherwise 'private' life. We have already seen the way in which formal Dharma practice can simply mean the increasing refinement of ego-clinging. In a similar way, Dharma service, shallowly interpreted, can be a form of egotism, contaminated with a degree of pride.

It is not enough merely to be working effectively to spread Buddhism, without doing so in the right spirit. It is all too possible to 'serve the Dharma' in a way that is, in the end, self-oriented. One can be very effectively organising Buddhist activities and institutions and teaching the Dharma, leading retreats and the like – and yet, subtly or not so subtly – be feeding one's own pride. This is a danger to which many a highly effective Buddhist has fallen prey, both outside and within our own circles, as I know to my own cost. One has seen a number of such people: they meditate regularly and apparently effectively and devote much of their lives to propagating Buddhism – and yet at bottom, they are very obviously serving themselves to some degree. We still need an additional factor that is likely to transform formal Dharma practice and service of the Dharma into real self-transcendence – into the arising of bodhicitta.

Sangharakshita teaches that it is the circumstances of one's life and the activities one engages in that help to transform both formal Dharma practice and service of the Dharma so that they truly do break through self-clinging and allow the Stream of the Dharma to flow through one. One needs to practise and serve the Dharma in the context of a Dharma lifestyle.

Supportive conditions

But what is a Dharma lifestyle: is it, in the end, living as a monk or nun, as many branches of the Buddhist tradition might aver, whether explicitly or not? Much as Sangharakshita encourages his disciples to live a 'sutra-style' monastic life if they can, he has not founded a monastic order.²⁴ He has generally preferred, given both the prevalence of monastic formalism and the complex variety of modern social life, to clarify the principles that underlie a Dharma lifestyle and to encourage the evolution of ways of life that embody them.

The first and most obvious principle for a Dharma lifestyle is that it supports Dharma practice and Dharma service. This is fairly obvious and well-worn ground so I will only briefly rehearse the major elements of what it means. The first such element is that one's lifestyle, and especially one's means of gaining a livelihood, should be ethical, in accordance particularly with the principles laid down by the Buddha himself in discussing *samyak ājīva*. This could be taken to include matters that are not so commonly considered, such as good citizenship both local and global, environmentalism, and a more radical avoidance of activity that involves the suffering of other living beings – such as, it would seem, takes place in the dairy industry, for instance. Although not all will choose to consider their lifestyle in such detail, a deep concern with the consequences of one's way of life for others, human and non-human, as well as oneself is surely an indispensable basis for breaking free from self-attachment.

Support for Dharma practice and service will also be drawn from the guidance, encouragement, and companionship of other Dharma-practitioners and Dharma-servants. One needs to learn the Dharma from those more experienced than oneself, especially from those able to give genuine kalyana mitrata – a friendship that by its nature deepens one's experience of the Dharma. A Dharma lifestyle that does not contain a

24 See Sangharakshita, *Forty-Three Years Ago: Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination*, pp. 42–9.

significant degree of friendship based on the Dharma will be a lonely and difficult one – for most, one might say, almost impossible.

A final supporting factor important to mention is the aesthetic and psychological atmosphere, even culture, within which one's life is lived. The more brutal and harsh one's physical and social surroundings are, the more difficult it is truly to practise the Dharma – unless one has already attained a high degree of inspiration and insight. Many in the world today are simply weighed down by want or by the ugliness of their surroundings, the discordant tone of their social situation, and the general shallowness and meaninglessness of much that they are forced to do in order to survive and to fulfil their responsibilities towards their families. Poverty, ill health, political and social instability, and overwhelming pressures to conform make a Dharma life almost unthinkable for all but the most determined. I have seen the effects of such unfavourable circumstances at first hand in India, among our dedicated Buddhist brothers and sisters, and this is the condition of probably the great majority of human beings today.

Amongst those living a more middle-class life, especially in the 'developed' world, more are free from the most egregious pressures of this kind. Here the chief issue is the prevailing materialism of the atmosphere, which induces a kind of existential numbness, animated only by an individualistic drive to consume the latest products of our remarkably efficient economic system – efficient at least in stimulating and feeding our desires.

One needs then to find or create conditions that are ethical, give plentiful opportunities for kalyana mitrata, and are psychologically, culturally, and aesthetically supportive of one's Dharmic efforts. Exceptional individuals, as the Buddha himself appears to have been, make progress no matter what their circumstances – or rather they take active steps to mould their environment to support their efforts. Most others, sincerely inspired as they may be, find it very hard indeed to make much headway against countervailing circumstances.

But there is another, deeper issue behind the question of lifestyle and this requires a further examination of the dynamics of self-clinging.

Attachment and renunciation

We have spoken of ego-clinging as the deep structure of our consciousness, underlying our mental states and our behaviour. But that instinct is constantly forming and shaping the world around us through our words and actions. We solidify ourselves in our environments, patterning them to our own shape – although, oddly, our self-attachment may

crystallise in worlds that give us a lot of pain and that we ourselves may rail against. We identify elements of our experience as 'mine' – and others as 'not mine': we include people, objects, situations, ideas, and experiences in our own identity – and we specifically exclude others. Our deep sense of existential security may become bound up in our situation in this way, calling forth strong passions when what we have identified with is threatened or what we have identified ourselves against threatens us. Our way of life coagulates, hardening into a carapace of self, which makes yet more intractable the essential problem that the Dharma is intended to overcome.

A truly Dharma lifestyle will be one that resists this kind of solidification, leaving one free to deal more and more directly with the underlying substructure of self-illusion and clinging and to open up to transcending inspirations. This has traditionally been understood and practised as a life of renunciation, gradually giving up anything that deepens and hardens the problem and avoiding its further accumulation. Of course, it is at least possible to live in the midst of possessions and people and position with complete freedom from attachment, just as the Bodhisattva Vimalakirti is presented as doing, since the issue finally is within the mind. However, the less one renounces the more one will have to work to overcome one's attachments whilst immersed in their objects – which is not at all easy to do. Unless one has more or less decisively broken that self-attachment, anything but a life of progressive renunciation will simply tend to deepen it.

In discussing renunciation, it is important to stress that it should not be taken to mean an unhealthy psychological repression. A renunciative lifestyle that has any value cannot be devoid of pleasure, whether of a physical or mental kind: indeed, Sangharakshita has said that one should not attempt to give up the 'lower' pleasures of life until one has a definite experience of the 'higher' – the consequences otherwise are likely to be psychological distortion of one kind or another, or else hypocrisy. All this is necessary to stress because of the Western cultural habit of identifying 'the flesh and the devil', of seeing bodily pleasures as inherently sinful. Buddhism makes no such equation, stressing rather that pleasures of the flesh are relatively superficial and fleeting and cannot resolve deeper and more abiding disquiet – and easily distract us from doing so. The issue is not avoiding pleasure but avoiding addiction, in the sense of identifying one's happiness with any particular objects and craving constant resort to them – making them part of one's self-identity. And it is difficult to avoid addiction while continuing to take the drug.

Lifestyle in our movement

What then of Dharma lifestyle within the Triratna Community today? Over the first years of the movement's existence, in the West, there was a strong normative assumption about what a desirable lifestyle should be. Broadly speaking, it was understood that the best arrangement was 'semi-monastic' or even monastic: living in a single-sex community, working in a team-based Right Livelihood business, helping out at a Dharma centre, living on support not wages, not accumulating family responsibilities if one did not already have them, and not allowing one's sexual activity to become central to one's way of life. For quite a few years, the majority of Order members did live more or less in this way, with varying degrees of enthusiasm or discomfort. Gradually the balance shifted, as more people came into the Order who did not live in this way and quite a number of those who did stopped doing so.

The normative lifestyle of the past has for many years been a minority observance, although nonetheless a significant and highly influential one. It is clear that many good and faithful Order members and mitras are practising the Dharma effectively without participating in all or even any of what might once have been considered essential institutions for a true Dharma lifestyle. This is actively acknowledged and accepted in the ordination of many men and women into the Order who, for instance, are married with families – indeed, in India, most Order members are married, with very few exceptions. The overall emphasis is, rightly, on how effectively individuals Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, rather than whether or not they live in a community.

The maturing of the movement in the West has meant that there is now little or no group pressure to conform to a normative lifestyle and generally people feel freer to live the way that seems to suit them best – whether or not in practice they make choices that really support their commitment to the Dharma. This is to some extent a positive development, insofar as it may make it easier for people to choose their lifestyles as individuals, so that what participation there is in communities, Right Livelihood teams, and so forth may be more conscious and wholehearted. The general atmosphere of the Order and movement has thereby become less polarised around this issue and there is a greater mutual respect.

It is important to mention that in India, in contrast, there has always been and still is strong normative pressure, not only from the wider social group but even within the Order itself - pressure to get married. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is no socially acceptable ground between marriage and chastity among Indian Buddhists. Such single-sex residential communities as there have been have largely acted as temporary staging

posts for unmarried youth, albeit often to very positive effect. Although all the same ideas for forming a community-based Dharma lifestyle are known in India and efforts have been made to explore them in practice, culture and circumstances at present make this very difficult.

Since the movement's norms are less clear cut today, certainly in the West, individuals must make more conscious choices. In thinking about the kind of life to lead, taking for granted that nothing should be involved that is morally unskilful, the Dharma practitioner needs to keep in mind the principles previously mentioned: being as free as possible from excessive material worry and insecurity, having sufficient time and energy for formal Dharma practice, and getting active support, guidance, and encouragement, as well as avoiding mind-numbing distraction.

And then there is that more fundamental issue of renunciation, one that is not always easy to resolve in practice, given especially the efficiency and pervasiveness of the modern consumer economy and the freedom of liberal democracies. One will need to pay attention to how much the choices one makes tend to solidify ego-identity, building around one in relationships, possessions, status, and attitudes an manifestation of one's inner self-attachment. This of course is a natural propensity of the *prthagjana* and we are all subject to it, whatever our way of life. Nonetheless, some lifestyles will more readily feed that tendency and therefore make it far harder to see through one's identifications and break free of them so that *Dharma-niyāma* processes can unfold.

A supportive environment is not enough

However ethical, positive, and filled with friendship our way of life may be, it will not of itself bring about entry into the Stream of the Dharma. We need to be able to engage with the Dharma with a high degree of intensity. All our energies need to be involved in such a way that we reach the limits of our present self-construction.

The central issue of the Dharma life is, as we have seen again and again, the final undermining of the fundamental structure of self-clinging, so that *Dharma-niyāma* processes can unfold. Dharma practice, Dharma service, and a Dharma lifestyle in the terms so far defined are indispensable, but they are rarely enough to break through that deep instinctive habit.

Our Dharma practice, in the sense of systematic application of formal training to our minds, establishes the indispensable ground. It gradually prepares us, by way of karmic conditionality, so that we are sufficiently integrated and uplifted to absorb the impress of the truth. It engages us with the Dharma's highest insights so that they are more and more

integrated into our responses to the things that happen to us. It opens us up to that 'force' that transcends our self-attachment, so we are increasingly accessible to it, ready to welcome it with joy. But yet some extra spark will usually be needed to turn readiness into reality.

Serving the Dharma helps us to open up to what lies beyond our own self-clinging, enabling us to give ourselves. Yet it easily itself becomes a source of mere business, self-importance, or distraction. Something needs to transform it into a real giving up of self.

Similarly, a basic positive Dharma lifestyle cannot be dispensed with: the weaker our discipline and determination, the more necessary are favourable circumstances. We need an undistracting and supportive environment, with friends and teachers readily at hand to encourage and guide us, otherwise most of us cannot sustain our efforts to practise the Dharma. But a Dharma lifestyle alone is not enough, as is all too obvious in many a monastery or moribund single-sex community. Even as the basis for deep practice of meditation and study of the Dharma, it is frequently not enough.

This requires yet further exploration of the dynamics of breaking down self-clinging.

Real spiritual death and rebirth

What we are seeking here is real spiritual death and real spiritual rebirth. Our practice, supported by our disciplined lifestyle and in the context of our service of the Dharma, concentrates and uplifts our energies and makes Dharma reflection second nature to us. We are able, then, to address life wholeheartedly and will find our thoughts turning more and more spontaneously to the Dharma's deep truths as life flows on around us. Then the moment will come, in the midst of life itself, when we can see, beyond thought, those truths reflected in every instant of experience. We will realise that what we thought of as 'me' is simply a bundle of habits: as a friend put it to me, we will see that it is not that I *have* reactions, but that I *am* reactions. We will have begun to die spiritually, reaching the point at which those defensive reactions can no longer sustain the walls of self, because we have recognised decisively and directly their complete artificiality.

Our Dharma practice, service, and disciplined lifestyle will also attune us to the Buddha, as we open ourselves to the Dharma that he embodied and served. We will, in one way or another, have been meditating on his qualities and developing a deepening receptivity to the reality they express. In that moment of letting go of those egoic defences, we may

experience motivations arising within us, a force or energy, that has nothing to do with our personal interests – that is, in a phrase, supra-personal. And we will gladly give ourselves up to it. In Sangharakshita's words, after commencing practice of *sādhana*, from then on we will be 'guided from that dimension'.

Whether or not we are to experience a 'moment' of death and rebirth or simply a gradual and perhaps imperceptible shift in the emphasis of our being, Sangharakshita says that, for this to happen, the indispensable condition, beyond what has already been considered, is intensity. Our lives need to become centred more and more wholeheartedly on the Dharma. Whatever we do, wherever we are, whatever are our goals, all need to become more and more imbued with the spirit of the Dharma. Our energies, our motivations, our ambitions, our dreams even, must become focused in the Dharma. Sooner or later, the sheer intensity of our engagement will bring us up against our underlying self-clinging in a way that we cannot avoid.

The inherent contradiction between that deep, instinctive sub-structure and our Dharmic aspiration and understanding will create a tension that, at times, could seem unbearable. Things will go wrong, our plans will fail, people will let us down or turn against us, those we love will not return our special feelings, or else figures central to our psychic landscape will be wrenched from us by death. And against all our training – hours of *metta-bhāvanā*, reflection on impermanence, contemplation of the buddhas and bodhisattvas – and in spite of all we ourselves have said – the consoling words of kalyana mitrata we have spoken, the inspired lectures we have given, the insightful articles we have written – we may find ourselves reacting: despair, rage, jealousy might surge uncontrollably through us. We will, in the words of the *Diamond Sutra*, be 'well humbled', well humbled will we be, indeed.²⁵

The intensity of our own efforts and the intensity of the situation have brought on this intense humiliation. And that intensity holds us to our humbling. We cannot stop reacting, at least inwardly, but we cannot justify our reaction to ourselves, with blame or other kinds of rationalisation. Our commitment to the Dharma is too intense to let us off so lightly. We have to stare down into the depths of our own emotions, down into our reactions, down to their source, the self-clinging that has now been forced out into the open. We can then see it for what it really is, an artificial construction that is the cause of all our pain and the unskilful action that

25 Trans. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*, p.56. See Sangharakshita's illuminating remarks on this passage in Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words*, p.157.

flows from it. And we can realise that it has no value for us at all and that we do not need to carry on sustaining it. Then we can cry with the Buddha, 'O housebuilder, now you are seen!' And if we cannot yet declare, 'Never again shall you build me a house [of self]', we know that we can quickly dismantle that house whenever it is reconstructed and in time will give the final victory cry, 'Your rafters are all broken, your ridgepole shattered. The [conditioned] mind too has gone to destruction: one has attained to the cessation of craving.'²⁶ All our energies will then flow effortlessly into that service of the Dharma that has been the focus of our intensified lives.

The workings of that intensity can be seen from a different point of view – perhaps this depends upon temperament: maybe 'hate-' and 'greed-types' vary in how they will feel it. We may find that it is the intensity of the need around us that simply snaps our self-infatuation, jolting us out of ourselves. Sangharakshita describes his experience of feeling that he was 'an impersonal force' in Nagpur in 1956. What seems to have happened is that the overwhelming need for consolation and guidance of those hundreds of thousands of new Buddhists simply made him forget himself. He already had a vivid sense of the significance of the Dharma for humanity and had dedicated himself to its service, especially since being left by his teacher in Kalimpong to 'stay here and work for Buddhism'. But by his own account, though the need was great everywhere, it was not felt very strongly by many with whom he had come into contact. Now there was a huge multitude who, having committed themselves to Buddhism as the solution to their most immediate problems, were desperately in need of help from the Dharma, right now. It was enough to bring something more out of him, something that went beyond him as a person.

The Third Order of Consciousness

Sangharakshita teaches that this kind of intensity is most likely to come about in a team of committed Dharma practitioners, living a simple shared Dharmic way of life, closely and intensively cooperating together in serving the Dharma. These conditions offer the greatest opportunity to enter the Stream of the Dharma. Within such a Dharma community, will be found the best basis for bodhicitta to arise. This is a key understanding underlying Sangharakshita's founding of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community.

When people come together who deeply share a common vision and purpose, their efforts combine in a momentum that draws them all onward,

²⁶ Trans. Sangharakshita, *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth*, 154. These words are traditionally said to have been spoken by the Buddha immediately after his Awakening.

beyond themselves. This is Sangha. If they are able to join in real harmony, with openness and mutual trust, then the weaknesses of each are obviated and their strengths contributed selflessly to their shared Dharma service. Between them they set up a powerful current, by which they are all simultaneously carried along. If all the conditions of Dharma practice and lifestyle are in place, then an intensity of combination is created out of which something more than the sum of the individuals comes into play – bodhicitta arises, *Dharma-niyāma* processes begin to flow. Sangharakshita stresses that in this kind of situation one does not think of this as happening to any one person in particular – that is not how it is felt. Beyond the personal consciousness of each, arises out of the quality of combination of all, a consciousness or energy that is supra-personal. He has referred to this as a 'third order of consciousness':

This consciousness is not the sum total of the individual consciousnesses concerned, nor even a kind of collective consciousness, but a consciousness of an entirely different order for which we have no word in the English language but to which the Russian word *sobornost* perhaps gives a clue.²⁷

The Order and the Third Order of Consciousness

For members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, the Order itself is the primary setting for this kind of experience. When they receive ordination, Order members are in effect committing themselves to help bring it about. Actually, it is not even that it needs bringing about: for it is already there. The Order was founded, as we have seen, by what Sangharakshita could only describe as that supra-personal force or energy, initially working through him, now through others too. At ordination, rather, one offers oneself as a vehicle for that force or energy that already is active within the Order. One commits oneself to participating in it. One undertakes to establish in one's life the conditions by which this may happen: wholehearted Dharma practice, work with others to serve the Dharma, and a renouncing lifestyle. And to the extent that we all do that, then the Order will continue 'literally' to be the thousand-armed, eleven-headed Avalokitesvara.

For some this talk of a 'supra-personal force' or 'third order of consciousness' is mere rhetoric or even wishful thinking. They can point to all the problems in the Order: the disharmony, the unskillfulness, the confusion, even the spiritual limpness. And that is there for the seeing, it cannot be denied – although there is much else to be witnessed, even of

27 Sangharakshita, *The History of My Going for Refuge*, p. 93.

ordinary virtue and good sense. Some, whether Order members or not, may not experience anything of a self-transcending kind within the Order. One cannot insist that they do when they do not, nor can one prove its existence to them by rational argument. But many of us do experience something of this kind and most of us have come to the Order because of it.

One can, for instance, often experience an atmosphere, hovering in and out of focus, at Order gatherings, especially at Order Conventions, or on certain retreats or the like. Suddenly it seems that everyone is lifted beyond themselves and participates in a shared consciousness that denies the individuality of none yet is more than each: that 'third order of consciousness' of which Sangharakshita speaks, beyond both individual and collective consciousness.

That force is a potentiality that may come into play when Order members and others come together with sufficient intensity and depth to serve the Dharma. Generally speaking, the more they are in direct contact with other members of the Order, the more likely it is that the spark will flash. However, this should not be taken to mean that they must necessarily be in face-to-face contact all the time. The experience of solitude, even prolonged, is a very important ingredient. Solitude, on the basis of Dharma practice, intensifies one's sense of existential aloneness, which is the only basis for a real connection with others.

When one allows oneself to feel that aloneness fully, then even solitude will be experienced in the context of connection with others. Sangharakshita, for instance, has described his experience on a long secluded retreat in the very early days of the Order. He had had no contact with other Order members for some weeks, yet he said he could sense them as though seated all around him, even at specific locations in a great circle. If one's contact with people is sufficiently vivid, being physically apart from them does not break the connection. Similarly, Sangharakshita has said that, once he had left India, he did not feel the need to maintain a correspondence with his teacher, Dharmo Rimpoché, because he never felt separated from him.

The Order itself is then Order members' primary setting for collective service of the Dharma and it is, in my own experience, effective as such, generally speaking. That can especially be felt when Order members gather together in large numbers – which is why such gathering is so important. Those are, however, rare occasions, bringing together a special set of circumstances that cannot, for practical reasons, usually be sustained for more than a few days. If we truly want to let what feels like a supra-personal force work through us to transform the world, we need to bring

conditions of that kind together in daily life. We need to find ways of engaging effectively with Order members and others to serve the Dharma on the basis of Dharma practice and lifestyle. What then emerges is a living culture or atmosphere that immediately strikes others who come in contact with it. At its best, this kind of culture carries something more than the sum of what each individual brings to it – something even of the thousand-armed Avalokitesvara.

Most Order members surely do their best to bring into their everyday lives all the factors that will enable them to contribute to the Order as Avalokitesvara – although no doubt we could all do much more. Different individuals have different resources, circumstances, temperaments, capacities, and inclinations – all of which leads to a variety of different ways of practising, of serving the Dharma, and of living. Valuable as this diversity may be, it has a diffusing effect, especially with the Order's geographical spread and growth in numbers, making it more difficult for all to retain a sense of collective service of the Dharma. Some, no doubt, are so thoroughly steeped in the Order that they never cease to sense their participation in it, whether or not they gather often with other Order members. Most however will need regular direct contact with others who share their aspiration if they are to retain a living sense of shared Dharma service.

This is why the Order needs channels of regular contact between groups of Order members – and from time to time between all Order members, or at least as many as can or will make the effort to gather. We come together to reinforce our collective sense of serving the Dharma – so that we can allow the possibility of Avalokitesvara becoming embodied in the Order more and more fully. This is the critical importance of the Order's basic structure of chapter meetings, Order days and weekends, retreats, and conventions. This is the purpose of the Order and chapter convenors, locally, regionally, and internationally: to keep this structure alive and healthy. Their regular meetings with each other play an important part in maintaining that sense of harmony in a common purpose.

Despite this framework of cohesion, it would still be very difficult to keep alive and to deepen the spirit of collective service without other factors. The more separate the daily lives of Order members are from those of their brothers and sisters, the more superficial is their sense of serving the Dharma together likely to be, even though they may forgather from time to time. Of course, this depends on individual character and circumstances, and also on depth of commitment and understanding. Some, indeed, can be physically distant from others, yet feel themselves in the midst of the Order; many, however, perhaps most, cannot.

The difficulties that follow when most Order members do not frequently overlap with others is very evident in India, where almost all are married with families and in regular employment in very demanding conditions. Despite their impressive sincerity and devotion, it is a struggle for most to keep alive in their everyday experience a sense that they are participating in a spiritual community with a shared service of the Dharma – notwithstanding their unquestionable faith in their teacher and the Order. No doubt this will be true for many Order members in the West, too, although conditions are generally far more favourable to them doing so, should they choose to take advantage of them.

Something else is needed. The entire body of the Order is able, it would seem, to sustain a sense of collective service if there are sufficient members who do overlap on a daily basis, sharing lives and work. Where Order members come together on the right basis in communities, common projects, and personal interactions of various kinds, an intensity can be built that affects the whole Order. Those living collective Dharma lifestyles benefit themselves, but they also contribute to the larger whole. They generate through their interaction a social field or culture that communicates itself to other Order members – and indeed more widely.

It is for this reason that Sangharakshita continues strongly to recommend the same lifestyle as he has always done: living in a single-sex community, working in a team-based Right Livelihood business, helping out at a Dharma centre, living on support not wages, not accumulating family responsibilities if one does not already have them, and not allowing one's sexual activity to become central to one's way of life.

Of course he makes this recommendation recognising that it is possible to practise the Dharma effectively without involving oneself with all or any of the 'semi-monastic' institutions. It is also worth stating that it is not enough merely, for instance, to live in a single-sex community. At times it seems that some have identified the simple fact of living in that way with Dharma practice and service. Quite a number of communities have persisted more or less as shared accommodation, rather like a student flat – although sometimes occupied by rather ageing students! There is little deep and effective engagement with each other and little wider contribution to the Dharma – while some with heavy family duties and responsible jobs to hold down are making vigorous efforts in their Dharma practice, actively working for the Dharma, and participating fully in the life of the Order. Lifestyle choices can provide opportunities – but opportunities must be taken.

However, taking into account all possible exceptions, he still considers that the semi-monastic lifestyle offers the best balance of freedoms and

opportunities for most people to make real progress in the Dharma. Furthermore, he teaches that the Community as a whole needs sufficient people living and working together in that intensive way so as to sustain that field or culture imbued with the spirit of the Dharma.

New society

At its best, such a field or culture may be filled with an atmosphere, even a force, that is more than the sum of the individuals concerned. From time to time, this has happened, in my experience, in various situations over the years - indeed, not so infrequently. Often there has been insufficient maturity among leaders and others for that delicate combination to endure for more than a few months or weeks, even days or minutes – but for a while it was there, like the coming down to earth of that 'beautiful iridescent ball' Sangharakshita metaphorically saw hovering in the air when he was initiating his very first Dharma work.²⁸ In such cases, after some time that delicate balance is lost and either the institutions fail or transmute into something less ideal, for the time being.

There are, however, some situations in the movement that have matured and are able to sustain the delicate combination over time so that the sense of something greater than the individuals concerned is never too far away. I am myself aware of a number of such in the UK and in India from my own direct experience – and no doubt there are others elsewhere of which I am unaware.

There is quite a range of factors that can be discerned in all these situations, such as a degree of stability and collective experience, sound organisation and effective financial management, and a leadership that is able to maintain a Dharmic direction whilst facilitating a wide participation. One of the most striking elements in them is that there is a core of people who are in very active and regular deep contact with each other – and contact here means face to face, daily contact. Almost always that core of people will be working together on a project that serves the Dharma, the more directly the better. Very often, most of those key people will be living together in communities, whether all in the same one or in a number of communities that have a lot of interaction between their members.

Once that kind of atmosphere exists, others who are not so closely involved can readily participate in it and contribute to it. It may even be possible for those who have little direct contact to feel themselves part of it, too, whether their connection is mediated by letters or social networks

28 Sangharakshita, *Facing Mount Kanchenjunga*, 1991, p. 38.

or by imaginative means. However, for that to be possible, there needs to be a core of people who live and work together in a strong and effective way.

It is this culture, gathering round a group of Order members intensively sharing their lives and work, that Sangharakshita has called the 'New Society'. Although the term 'New Society' is not much in favour these days, it would seem, the idea behind it is as important as ever, if we are truly to fulfil our aspirations. It is not so much a collection of institutions, although these will be essential, but an intensive atmosphere generated from collective efforts that can carry the spark of what transcends us as individuals. The New Society is, as it were, a force-field generated by collective service of the Dharma. It is something that can be directly felt and is powerfully attractive to many who come in contact with it, giving a direct glimpse of what they are seeking. The New Society is, one could say, the concrete expression of what it was that founded the Order and movement – what seemed to Sangharakshita to have been like 'a supra-personal force or energy' that worked through him. And the New Society is one of the principal means whereby that force or energy is sustained and reaches out to touch many others.

Envoi

In this article, as in previous ones published recently, I have tried to draw together threads emerging from my conversations with Sangharakshita over the last three years. Some of what I have here discussed I have taken directly from what he talked about with me and some has emerged later out of our talks. As usual, I have shown him what I have written and he confirms that I do not misrepresent him and that my enlargements upon what he has said are consistent with his own understanding.

I have here tried to convey, in my own way, what I have got from my communication with him, which has been exceptionally important for me personally. In a sense, however, nothing new has arisen in our talks: I can trace most of what we have touched on to much earlier sources in his writings and talks and especially his seminars – although I believe he has expressed the principles he stands upon far more clearly and unequivocally than ever before. But I have felt a new and far deeper unity to my own understanding of the Dharma, coming not merely from Sangharakshita's words but from the mind those words express. And it is this that I have been doing what I can to communicate.

On this occasion, I have done my best to convey the unity of Sangharakshita's vision in relation to the practical manifestation of the

Order and movement. There is a direct correspondence between his own life, the nature of experience that transcends the personal, his understanding of the Dharma in terms of karmic and Dharmic conditionality, the best way to practise and live the Dharma, and the culture and institutions of our movement. Only if we can fully appreciate that unity will we, I believe, live in such a way that the processes of the *Dharma-niyāma* can arise.

The threads that I have been following with Sangharakshita have been connected with a deepening experience of my own. I have become more vividly aware, from time to time, of the highly personal, not to say egocentric, manifesting in parallel with what transcends the personal – the two appearing side by side, absolutely simultaneously. I have, for instance, sat enduring a friend's display of those self-centred reactions to which we are all prone and at the same time been conscious, I don't know how, of something far greater, something vast, even infinite, that seemed present particularly in him – like the blinding light of the sun glowing piercingly through the cracks in a badly built wall. I can only say that it is as if it is the nature of that something infinite, having been invoked, to burst through and express itself, but the nature of our petty personalities is to resist what we ourselves have invited.

Naturally, I have also sensed this experience of polarity even more cogently within myself: sometimes in meditation, sometimes sitting quietly, doing nothing, sometimes in the midst of giving a Dharma-talk before a large Indian crowd, sometimes in the thick of upset, confusion, or despair – it seems to come unbidden in any circumstance. At such times, this strange bundle of 'subhutine' personal habits and reactions seems quite insignificant, even laughable, to be viewed as the remarkable Hungarian novelist, Antal Szerb, puts it, 'In terms of protective tenderness and gentle irony'.²⁹ This gives me more and more confidence in the Buddha and his Dharma, and in my teacher and his presentation of it. My Dharma practice is, it would seem, on the side of the supra-personal.

But the most important point here is that I have increasingly felt this polarity in those situations in the Order and movement of which I have had experience in the last few years – which means, in my case, principally in India and the UK. One can easily pick out so many defects and problems in each one – and it is certainly our duty to acknowledge these and to resolve them. However, something else does shine through, I have felt, and shine through with increasing intensity, in many places and on many occasions.

29 Antal Szerb, *The Pendragon Legend*, Pushkin Press, 2007.

This is my experience, but it does not seem to be shared by everyone. One can find oneself in conversation with someone who points to this that is done wrong and that that is not done right – and one can only agree. And yet, all the time, one can oneself *feel*, and even feel very intensely, that something else is also present. It is as if you are both looking out over a landscape of industrial devastation while the sun is setting and, while he talks of the ugliness and bleakness of it all, you can see the dying light transforming every shape into a gilded mystery, all over-arched by a sky of fire. One cannot point, one cannot shake him from his gloomy contemplation. If one tries, one is merely dismissed as another of those who refuse to face the nastiness of things. So one can only gaze in wonder at what your eyes alone can see.

Fortunately, there are other eyes to see. There are many others in our Order and movement who do sense that something more than our egoistic desires is at work. In short, I am convinced that the Order does, at least to some extent, embody the thousand-armed, eleven-headed Avalokitesvara as Sangharakshita teaches that it can. I believe, from my own experience, that bodhicitta, to call it that, is working among us and that the movement is, to a degree, its manifestation. It was founded through Sangharakshita by what seemed to him as though it was a supra-personal force or energy and it continues at work through the Order and movement that was thereby founded. It is of the greatest importance that we allow ourselves to be aware of this. And it is of even greater importance that we work together to keep those *Dharma-niyāma* processes flowing among us.

This should, I suggest, be the way we talk about our chief goal and endeavour. I regard it as quite unhelpful to dwell on the personal attainment of Stream Entry, whether one's own or that of anyone else, so easily does that become a source of conceit, often rather delusional – and I have witnessed this at first hand. It is far better for us to think, individually and collectively, of trying to keep the conditions alive in dependence on which that something that seems like a supra-personal consciousness can continue to work in the world through our Order. Thinking in that way is itself one of the conditions in dependence on which that will happen.

We have seen, from Sangharakshita's own life and teaching, that three broad sets of conditions can be discerned underlying the arising of what goes beyond the merely personal: intensive Dharma practice, inspired service of the Dharma in close company with others, and a lifestyle wholeheartedly dedicated to the Dharma. I have wanted, here, above all to point to the collective dimension. Our collective institutions, systems, and activities are not merely about personal practice. If we view them in that way, then we can easily discard them if they do not immediately suit us. They are not however so easily set aside, for they are part of our practice,

insofar as they help to strengthen our collective sense of serving the Dharma together – my attendance at an Order weekend may strengthen that sense in others, whatever it does for me. We need to take them on in this spirit and participate actively in them if the Order is to continue to embody what the thousand-armed Avalokitesvara represents.

We need also to consider lifestyle from this point of view. It is not a question of simply choosing a lifestyle that suits one, rather as one might choose this breakfast cereal rather than that from the shelves of a supermarket – although no doubt personal preference must play a part. One needs to recognise that the way one lives can contribute to a greater or lesser extent to the life of the Order and therefore to the continued working through the Order of that supra-personal force or energy that Sangharakshita felt worked through him to found it. Unless a good many of us share our lives and work with other Order members on a daily basis it will be very hard to keep alive that sense of collective service of the Dharma. Besides the personal benefit that their participants may gain from living in communities or working together in projects that serve the Dharma, they will also be making a vital contribution to sustaining the conditions necessary for the whole Order to remain a channel for the power of the Dharma – assuming, of course, that such communities and projects are truly based on Dharma practice and service.

I hope that it is clear that what I have written is not a plea for a return to normative assumptions to which people feel pressured to conform. Individuals must be judged by their own efforts, not by their lifestyle. Each of us has to work with our own circumstances, outer and inner, and do our best to Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels from that starting point. What I have tried to show is that we will best achieve our Dharma goal, which cannot but be the transcendence of our self-clinging, if we serve the Dharma together – and that means making a conscious effort to mould our living so that we can spend substantial portions of our lives in as much contact with each other as possible. Then we will share a deep sense of serving the Dharma, side by side. Then we will be able to do what needs to be done, for our own and the world's well being, because that supra-personal force or energy will work through the Order more vigorously than ever.

A PERSONAL APPENDIX

The urge to write is the most compelling I experience, the ordinary impulses of the body aside. Yet when I sit before the blank screen, fingers poised over the keyboard, I start to day-dream or fiddle, idly busy at tidying my desk and rearranging my files. Once words do start to arrange themselves and form some coherent line of thought, my eye keeps going to the clock: it must, surely, be time for tea! There seems an awful responsibility in squeezing one's soul into the solid and enduring shapes of words: responsibility to truth, to time, to my readers, to myself – and, in this case, to my teacher, whose thoughts I am presenting and enlarging upon. It all seems such a tangle and every shaft of clarity entails a 'but...'. And I know there are those who will find their nerves set on edge by what I am saying, the way I say it, the very terms I use. I know that every word is a hostage to fortune. And yet I would write.

For me, every act of writing has its own distinct struggles. In this case, there have been two in particular. The first is a familiar one to me, not merely in writing but in most aspects of life, experienced here however with unusual intensity: the struggle to translate intuition into expression. Over the course of my various conversations with Bhante, a very deep and compelling intuition has grown in me, planted by his words – but more truly by who he is. The intuition itself is formless, yet nonetheless potent, a disturbing spirit in the background, haunting me for release. It demands to be expressed, seeking form that is reasoned and persuasive, yet one that strikes an existential chord in readers – or at least in some of them. For months, even a year or two, coagulated thoughts have been peeling off in fragments under the surface of my mind, sometimes turbid and half formed, sometimes vivid and coherent – but all bound up with a painful sense of inadequacy to the overwhelming significance of the underlying intuition. And it is painful, like one of those dreams in which there is something that you must do, but you don't quite remember what it is and every twist and turn of the action keeps taking you away from your purpose.

And then finally one has done it, brought that embryonic intuition to birth: and of course what has come cannot be at all adequate to the infinite implication of its insemination. After mountainous labours – a mouse. But there it is: it has been done; and I have slept the deep sleep of contented fulfilment and feel at ease with all around me, where before everything had jangled and jarred accusingly. Even the sun is shining today, after days and days of rain.

My second struggle in relation to this article has been with what my theme says to me, myself. As much as anyone else, especially every

member of the Order, this is written for me – in a sense about me. It puts me to the question, as much, if not more, than anyone else. Am I living up to the exhortation the intuition has wrung from me? Am I practising the Dharma ardently enough? Am I living a lifestyle that truly supports my practice and my participation in the Order? Am I serving the Dharma with a sufficiently cooperative wholeheartedness? The answer can only be, no, not enough – never enough!

I do not here want to descant on my many shortcomings in all these respects. That would be tiresomely self-indulgent and itself express a major shortcoming. But I believe I do owe those who know about me and my life an explanation of an obvious anomaly. I pass on in this article Sangharakshita's strong recommendation of the semi-monastic lifestyle and yet I do not live like that myself, in one important respect. I do not live in a community, but my base, my 'home', where I spend a third of my time, is in a property that I own and share with Dharmacharini Srimala.

Let me start by giving the facts of where I came from, where I am now, and how I got here: a brief history of my lifestyle since ordination. In 1972, shortly before I was ordained, I moved into a small men's community in London. For the next thirty or more years, I continued to live in men's communities: from 1974 I lived for one year in what was the first single-sex community (established before I moved there), the famous No. 5, Balmore Street, in Archway, North London; then, for five years, in the Sukhavati community, which consisted of the men who transformed the Old Fire Station in Bethnal Green into the London Buddhist Centre; then, for twelve years, at the Padmaloka Retreat Centre in Norfolk; and finally, after three years living on my own at Guhyaloka, for twelve years in the Madhyamaloka community in Birmingham. Although all these communities had their ups and downs, I was myself an enthusiastic member, deeply inspired by the ideal that such communities attempted to embody and often thoroughly enjoying our life together.

Throughout this period, my life and work was wholly centred on helping to build the institutions of our movement and working to spread the Dharma. And of course it was very much a life of collective endeavour, serving the Dharma together. A high point for me was especially my time at Padmaloka, helping to establish the men's ordination process with a remarkable team of friends. The Madhyamaloka community was a more complex and puzzling experience, perhaps because we all had to spend so much of our time away, on retreat and visiting centres, especially outside the UK. But nonetheless I found that my stay in the community was mostly a very satisfying and engaging experience.

Even before ordination, I felt strongly attracted to the monastic life and would have liked to have been a monk – in a sense, I felt that was what I was meant to be. For a number of years I had no sexual relations and had deliberately chosen to spend most of my time with men, as a definite aspect of Dharma discipline. But I could not healthily transcend sex and romance and knew that a forced abstinence was not real *brahmacharya*. And so, after much hesitation and misgiving, in 1982, I began seeing Srimala, who lived then with her two small daughters, in Norwich, the town nearest to Padmaloka.³⁰ From the outset, our relationship was a very positive and loving one, with a great deal of mutual consideration and respect. I think I can say that, from that day to this, we have hardly had a cross word and have never had a serious misunderstanding. My connection with her became one of the principal constant threads in my life.

She too is a dedicated member of the Order and we both aspired to *brahmacharya*, off and on practising chastity for long periods. For twelve years, I was an Anagarika, and, once her daughters were independent, she too wore the yellow *kesa* for several years. Even though we lived separately, we met regularly (and chastely) whenever we were not travelling, as I very often was.

By the turn of the century, it would appear that I was at my peak. My life seemed to be going exceptionally well. I had many responsibilities that I carried with enthusiasm – I was International Order Convenor and, in August 2000, Bhante had appointed me the first Chairman of the College of Public Preceptors, those to whom he had handed on his responsibilities as head of the Order. I felt intensely engaged and deeply fulfilled. And right at that time, in the midst of it all, things began to come unstuck.

Quite a number of external factors conspired together to create a crisis: Bhante entered his horrible period of sleeplessness; Yashomitra's letter was published; there was an explosion of criticism of Bhante and, if anything, more vehemently of me; a close colleague let us all down very badly; and in 2003 my mother died – all brewed together with many other incidents, major and minor. Yet, to me it seems that what happened was not to do with these incidents, or rather they were merely the trigger for something waiting to happen inside me.

I would like one day to write up those processes in detail: mainly so that I myself can understand them better. For the time being, let me briefly say that it seems I reached the end of a particular construction of my self. The idea I had of who I was and what I should be doing could no longer contain all the forces within me. I broke down – or rather broke up, in the

30 She tells her own story in, Srimala, *Breaking Free*.

sense of fragmenting. My involvement with everything I had been so engaged with gradually wound down – although I made two or three determined efforts to pull myself together, each failing for lack of willing energy, sometimes, I am sorry to say, meaning I let people down. I did not offer myself for re-election as Chairman of the College and I let many other responsibilities lapse. It was a very painful and bewildering time and I felt I had no clear direction at all – very difficult for one so accustomed to knowing exactly where he was going. I was not able to express to anyone else what was happening – I could not even express it to myself. All that I believed in simply fell away. The only truly solid element in my life at that time was Srimala. I hardly discussed with her what I was feeling, for I had no words for it, but her common sense, loving sympathy, and undemanding support were completely reliable and I am deeply grateful to her for it.

I let myself drift. It seemed that my will could no longer direct me and I determined, more or less consciously, simply to see what happened. One day, on a walking tour in Snowdonia with Srimala, I glanced in an estate agent's window and the sale notice for a ruined cottage somewhere in the mountains drew my attention. This seemed to offer a good excuse for exploring the countryside and, without really considering the possible implications of what we were doing, we drove up into the Berwyn mountains.

The deserted cottage proved a gloomy, dank place, beside a road on the dark side of the hill. But the agent had given us a leaflet for another, similar ruin in which she thought we might be interested and off we went to find it, in the same mood of idle interest. As we drove out of the small granite town of Bala, we saw ahead of us the long bulk of Arenig Fawr. Snow capped the mountain, radiant now in brilliant sunshine. We followed the directions on the agent's leaflet and, to our astonishment and delight, found the commanding presence of that high ridge drawing us nearer and nearer to it. Immediately before us as we approached, steep crags fell sharply from the summit, standing out darkly against the glowing white. The road led straight toward the mountain and went no further.

Half a mile from the mountain, we saw a gate marked, 'Maes Gwyn', the name of the property we had come to investigate. We left the car and walked along the grass covered track, down a gentle slope through the sheep runs. There gradually came into view, completely isolated below the road, a small cluster of farm buildings, built in ageless style of roughly dressed granite boulders, roofed with sagging corrugated iron, red and rusting. Three great beech trees and a line of sycamores stood around the site, like sentinels. A small brook rustled through, its unceasing murmur the only sound in the immense stillness. All around was space. Standing in

the yard beside the barns and cottage, in every direction one could see mountains etched against the skyline, for the place was at the centre of a great circle of high hills, the eastern outliers of the Snowdon range, showing sharp and clear in the crisp winter light. We were both now completely in the spell of this magical spot.

Although we had not set out with any intention, as it seemed, of buying a property, things quickly began to move in that direction. My mother had recently left me a substantial legacy, which I quickly realised was enough for the purchase. However, the buildings were in very poor repair, being little more than ordered piles of stones. The cottage was the most obvious place to make habitable but, since it could not have been lived in for more than fifty years, would require more or less rebuilding. I could buy it, but I couldn't do much with it. As we later clambered up the rocky peak of Cnicht, deeper in Snowdonia, Srimala rather hesitantly volunteered that she had some money from the sale of her house in Norwich. She herself would like to live a more solitary life, in the midst of the countryside. And that was it. Everything followed from those spontaneous musings that unfolded in the midst of that mountain grandeur.

The plan was that we would renovate two parts of the property, at opposite ends of the range of buildings, each occupying its own world. Srimala would live in the old cottage and I would use the other from time to time, as a retreat, keeping my main residence in Birmingham. Srimala moved there in 2005, once the renovation had been half achieved, and, in the event, I moved out of Madhyamaloka in 2006, and based myself fully at Maes Gwyn. I was now doing exactly what I had often recommended to others that they should avoid.

I know that some people have been affected by my purchase of the property and living there more or less with Srimala. Some have felt betrayed by it or undermined or discouraged. Some have been angry that I was failing to practise what I had preached, whether they agreed with that sermon or not. In many ways, I share those feelings. I regret that I have not continued to exemplify a way of life that I have never ceased to value very highly and I feel sad that this may have made it more difficult for someone to keep their inspiration for community life or put anyone off adopting that lifestyle – although, in the end people must live in community because they themselves want to, not because someone else does. But, above all, I feel great shame at the whole half-conscious process, unfolding in an inner atmosphere of disillusionment and despair. I didn't discuss it with anyone, I didn't even really think about it. An opportunity arose that my heart leapt at and I followed that impulse. I think that, given a bit more pause on my part and a situation more favourable than the one I was in had

become, I could as well have weathered the storm while living in a community.

All that acknowledged, living at Maes Gwyn has turned out very well indeed for me and, on the whole, I am very happy with the life I now lead and I have no thought, at present, of changing it. I allowed myself simply to drift into this situation, but having been wafted here, I was very fortunate to find that I had the circumstances that I needed. Maes Gwyn enabled me to withdraw into the 'cave of the heart' so that something new could emerge, like the caterpillar's chrysalis, from which it can arise with the exquisite wings of a butterfly. I needed space and silence and simplicity. I needed to be as far away from my old life as possible and from all that could evoke my naturally outgoing, active energy, always ready to engage and to do. I needed to listen to what was going on below the surface and learn to live in a deeper and more rounded way.

Maes Gwyn in Welsh means 'White Place or Land'. I asked Robin Evans, the neighbour from whom we bought it, why it was called that and he said, 'Must be because it is very pure!' and indeed 'gwyn' can mean 'pure', 'holy', or 'blessed'. And for me it has indeed been a Pure Land. Srimala's presence too has been a blessing. She has, with her concrete wisdom and simplicity of heart, been both a very great support and an inspiring example. I can tell immediately, from the look on her face, when I have escaped from what actually is into a mere fantasy of what could be. And she herself wants to be alone much of the time, leaving me to get on with what I need to do.

In 2008, we closed the gate and withdrew into Maes Gwyn for eight months with no outside contact – apart from leaning over the fence, once in a while, for a chat with Robin about the sheep and the weather. During that time I never stepped into a car or walked further than a few fields beyond the houses. Anantamani very generously drove over every three weeks with the supplies we needed, leaving them at the top of the track. For the first two months, Srimala and I would meet up from time to time, Srimala's mother having quite recently died, but then we spent five months each immured in our quite separate parts of the property.

My time of solitude was, to begin with, extremely painful. I seemed to have lost all sense of direction and felt strongly disillusioned with so much that had previously sustained me – and mostly with myself. I felt a lot of remorse – and not a little self-pity! And I felt alone, deeply alone. Had I completely wasted my life? What was I to do now? Without a clear idea of what I was doing, I didn't know who I was. And, as an external manifestation of my state, the weather was at its most Welsh: a constant pall of dark clouds weighing down upon me, unceasing rain, and days of

wind that unsettled my soul. I felt I had to face the full force of my previous karma, going back forty or fifty years or more, even seeming to come from beyond my birth.

In retrospect, it appears to me that the very energy with which I had pursued my life till then had led me to this point. With whatever understanding I had, of myself, of the Dharma, I had thrown myself into Dharma practice, a Dharma lifestyle, and service of the Dharma. I have never been anything but wholehearted. I had used my will to drive myself onward. On the whole, I had been of good service – although my limitations had also led me to do some foolish things and to cause harm to some people. But now I could not go on in that way. The sheer energy of my engagement generated my own humiliation: I was well humbled indeed!

As I allowed the winds of the past to blow themselves out, something new began to emerge, as though a shape through the mist. I realised that I had not lost all faith at all. Below the level of thought and feeling, I recognised that I had unshakable confidence in the Buddha. I knew that he had attained bodhi – I knew it from my own experience, however distant I was from the Buddha right now. There was, I could feel, something in the nature of consciousness itself that made it certain that the Buddha had achieved Liberation. I could taste what that meant and I could rest myself completely upon it. Gradually all the pieces began to settle. I knew that it was Bhante who had enabled me to know the Buddha and I felt deep gratitude and confidence in him, for this and so much else. I saw that the Order and movement he had founded are the means for many others to connect with the Buddha's realisation. I did not know specifically what I would do, from now on, but whatever it was it would be in service to the Dharma through the Order and movement as a disciple of Sangharakshita. Everything was back where it had been – and yet, everything was quite different.

Gradually my life has fallen into a new pattern, although with many of the old features. I spend two periods of three months in India each year, where I have had to step into Suvajra's shoes to lead the men's Ordination process team – Suvajra, very reluctantly, had to withdraw for health reasons. I do no ordinations myself but function as a kalyana mitra to the team members and work closely with the other Preceptors, Public and Private. Besides this, I lead many retreats, lead study, and give talks. I follow a very full programme, while I am there, trying to do as much as I can in the time available to me.

Back in Britain, I visit the LBC, of which I am President, for two periods each year of a week or ten days, and I attend the biannual meetings

of the Preceptors College, again for a week or so at a time. I visit Hungary twice a year, where I am keeping contact with a group of Gypsy Mitras who run a number of secondary schools for Gypsy youngsters who have not been able to work within the state school system. And I spend as much time as I can at Maes Gwyn, leading a far more reflective and solitary kind of life, especially trying to keep up a flow of writing. All in all, I am usually able to keep about four months each year free to be at Maes Gwyn and I have maintained a steady flow of articles, mostly based on my recent conversations with Bhante. And, of course, I visit Bhante from time to time to continue those discussions.

In sum, I feel I am living my life very effectively and that I am coming to understand the Dharma more and more deeply. And I feel that I am serving the Dharma in close company with a wide range of friends. I regret the way I handled my departure from community life and view it as having been by no means inevitable. But something had to change in me and the circumstances at Maes Gwyn have enabled that to happen, at least to some extent. I believe now that I have an excellent basis for practising and serving the Dharma and have no thought at present of changing the conditions of my life – although I am ready for whatever may come.

I know that in owning a property and living alongside Srimala I have, in my phrase in the article, to an extent 'solidified my ego-identity'. I may, no doubt, have to pay some price for that, for attachment does have its price. But at present I do not feel I am held back much by these circumstances. Indeed, I feel they support my Dharma life very well – although I am aware that that is the kind of hubristic statement that could well come back to haunt me!

I want to emphasise one last point. I have described, very briefly and superficially, a sort of 'spiritual crisis' that I passed through in the last ten years. This was a very painful and puzzling episode in my life, but I do not now regard it as something that went wrong – although no doubt it could have happened in a smoother and less disruptive way. The Dharma life is, from one point of view, a constant breaking down of ego-clinging so that one can open up to those supra-personal forces. This happens again and again on many levels. One breaks down one structure of self, but it is replaced by another that is more subtle and benign, if one is working skilfully. That too must be broken down ... and so on until the structure becomes so loose and subtle that it never gains sufficient solidity to obstruct the flow of Dharmically conditioned states.

In some of us, those breakdowns and reassemblies are almost imperceptible and in some they are dramatic, even catastrophic – and perhaps in some, they are imperceptible sometimes and sometimes

dramatic. However they manifest, they will happen – they must happen if we are to make progress in the Dharma. Indeed, Dharma life generates these breakdowns – or, better, breakthroughs. One practises the Dharma, one lives a Dharma lifestyle, one serves the Dharma, all as intensively as possible to the best of one's understanding and ability at that time – and a tension builds up. Inner contradictions are exposed, unresolved feelings defy suppression, superficial understandings cease to fit experience, doubts and confusions rise to the surface. Everything one has left behind, 'bypassed' as the expression has it, refuses any longer to be ignored. Often a good chat with a friend resolves things for the time being, or a spell on retreat. But sometimes in some people the build-up of tension under the surface leads to a quaking to the foundations. That, I believe, is what happened to me.

How this sort of change from one level to another happens will depend substantially on one's character, the circumstances around one, and the intensity of one's Dharma life. I believe that for me a major conditioning factor was the fact that, since my ordination at the age of 25, I have been in a leading position in the Order and movement. I have taken on my responsibilities with as much energy, intelligence, and faithfulness as I was capable of – and the tension gradually built up and finally burst. In looking back at it all, I can see that it was bound to happen like that, given my character and situation. I regret very much whatever harm I have done in my ignorance. However, fundamentally, I do not at all regret the process that I have gone through – although I sincerely hope, and even expect, that I will not have to go through it again, at least not in that way.

This particular process has then arrived at its conclusion, like a complex musical progression, beginning with ordered harmonies that slowly appear to dissolve into chaotic dissonance, until all the discordant themes are gathered together and resolved in a new and richer pattern, leaving one with a deep sense of peace. For me, symbolic completion came in a delightful visit that Bhante made to Maes Gwyn, with Vidyaruchi, in September 2011. He had been mentioning for some months the possibility of coming down to see us, however I purposely had not pressed him, thinking the long drive across the hills tiring for an old man. But down he and Vidyaruchi came, taking the high pass over the Berwyn mountains and across the windswept moor dotted with sheep.

It was clear he had come out of pure goodwill, simply to be with us for a while and savour the place where we lived, which of course he could not truly see. Nothing much happened: tea was drunk, lunch was eaten, Bhante saw into our respective houses, and sat and chatted with each of us. As I supported him across the slippery yard to my house, he delicately, almost lovingly, stroked the grey, uneven surface of the granite wall as we passed.

We meditated with him for a little while in our shrine room, in front of the large blue ceramic Buddha he had bought many years before in Italy and had given to us 'on indefinite loan'. He recited the blessings, a few photographs were taken, and then Vidyaruci drove him up the grassy track and away, before the light began to fade.

In June 2012, we invited a few of our Welsh-speaking neighbours, including our builders, to help us dedicate the shrine room in the language of this beautiful land.³¹ Anantamani gave a short introduction in Welsh to what we were about to do and then led with great feeling the Dedication Ceremony, which she had translated: and they all joined in quite unselfconsciously, everyone of them born a Calvinist Methodist – if somewhat nominally so now, in some cases. Afterwards, we unveiled two slate plaques with Welsh inscriptions, one commemorating the work of the builders for having 'given these old stones new life' and the other in memory of Bhante's visit:

Bendithiwyd y Neuadd Fwdha hon
gan ein Hathro,
Urgyen Sangharakshita,
18 Medi 2011³²

31 Moksapriya made a short film of this event, which can be found on www.subhuti.info.

32 "This Buddha Hall was blessed by our Teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita, on 18th September 2011."

The Dharma Revolution and the New Society

Dharmachari Subhuti

Based on talks given in October 2010 at Padmaloka Retreat Centre in England

The Dharma can be revolutionary – indeed, the Dharma **is** revolutionary, when it truly is the Dharma. When the Dharma is genuinely understood and practised on a wide enough scale, there will be a significant change for the better in society.

This is not merely theory: we have solid evidence that it can be true. In 1956, the great Indian statesman and Buddhist leader, Dr. Ambedkar, precipitated a social revolution in India on the basis of the Dharma, affecting the lives of millions of 'Dalits', people who were formerly considered untouchable by their fellow Hindus. When large numbers of these people converted to Buddhism, they gained a new confidence in themselves and began to take their rightful place in society. The effects of this revolution are evident in statistics showing the much greater improvement in social and economic status of those who became Buddhists compared with similar castes in which very few conversions took place³³. This gives us an important illustration of what Dharma revolution means.

Dr Ambedkar saw the Dharma as the best, even the only, way to bring about something like an ideal society – a 'new society'. He defined such a society in terms of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which for him were deep spiritual principles, derived not from the French Revolution but 'from the teachings of my master, the Buddha'.³⁴ There is **liberty** when people are free to live the kind of

³³ Census of India, 2001, see <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/censusdataonline.html>

³⁴ Dr B. R. Ambedkar: Speech on All-India Radio, 3rd October 1954;

life they consider best – so long as they do not harm or infringe the liberty of others. **Equality** means that everybody has broadly the same opportunities, at least to begin with – although he was quite clear that not everybody is equal in talent, ability, intelligence, or character. And **fraternity**, which is perhaps the area where he has the most interesting things to say, means an attitude of respect and reverence of each citizen for every other. This he equates with democracy itself: democracy is not merely a means of choosing a government, but a state of mind, he says, a fraternal attitude that is ultimately one of *metta* or loving-kindness that expresses itself in moral action – *sila* or morality being *metta* in action. Society should, he taught, be founded on ethical principles, which themselves are the expression of respect, reverence, and even of *metta*, of love.

Dr Ambedkar arrived at his conclusions about the transformative effects of the Dharma after many years of struggle to overcome the terrible historical injustice of untouchability, to which he himself had been subjected simply by his birth. Though born into a caste then considered untouchable, he was fortunate, through the philanthropy of two reformist Maharajas, to get an excellent education in the West and returned to a senior post in the government of one of these princes. However, he soon realised that education was not enough, for he still suffered humiliation and prejudice, for all his Doctorates. 'Modernisation' alone did not bring change. He devoted himself thereafter, with outstanding selflessness, to freeing his people from the oppressions of caste by every means at his disposal: journalism, social agitation, labour organising, legal action, political activism, and even in government – first in the Viceroy's Council and then in the first Cabinet of the independent India, in which he served as Law Minister. He was asked by Pandit Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister, to chair the committee that oversaw the drawing up of the Constitution of the Republic of India – and is reported to have done the lion's share of the work himself.

However, even at this pinnacle of personal achievement, he knew that not enough had been done: caste discrimination persisted throughout India, much as it always had, and hundreds of millions of people suffered under its oppressions. When there was resistance in Parliament to his attempts to bring full equality to women by reforming Hindu family law, and Government support was withdrawn, he became finally disillusioned with the political process as a means of eradicating social injustice. He had done so much to give India political democracy and at least the legal basis for social

democracy, yet the old attitudes persisted. The problem lay much deeper than laws and constitutions could reach.

We built a temple [the Constitution] for a god to come in and reside, but before the god could be installed, the devil had taken possession of it.³⁵

Dr Ambedkar had been thinking deeply about the roots of caste over many years, coming to understand that those roots lay in the mind itself: 'Caste is a notion, a state of mind.' That notion was integrally embedded in the whole Hindu mind-set, entwined with its powerful and superstitious beliefs in a social destiny ordained by the gods. But this insight also suggested the solution: 'What

mind creates, mind can undo'.³⁶ In 1936 he decided that he would leave Hinduism and began the search for another religion, both for himself and for his people. He had definite criteria for his search: such a new religion must enshrine the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, utterly rejecting caste in all its forms. It must also be compatible with reason and science, not enjoining blind belief in supernatural agencies that control human fate. And it should not justify poverty.

He had long been personally drawn to the Buddha and his teaching, both for its spiritual power and its emphasis on social morality. After a sincere exploration of the major world religions, he concluded that this ancient Indian religion was the best one for his people, indeed for all humanity, and, on 14th October 1956, he went for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha himself, and then inducted some 400,000 of his followers into Buddhism. The Dharma Revolution had begun.

For Dr. Ambedkar, real reform comes about only from a change in mental attitudes and outlook on the part of many people in society. It is the Dharma that offers the firmest basis for that change of heart – a change that would express itself in a transformed society that was truly equal, just, and free, underlain by a powerful sense of shared citizenship, even by respect and love between all citizens. He considered this to be true not just for the oppressed castes from which he himself came or even for all Indians – he believed that the Dharma was the surest basis for a truly just society anywhere.

³⁵ Dr B. R. Ambedkar: speech in Rajya Sabha, 2nd Sept. 1953

³⁶ Dr B. R. Ambedkar: *Annihilation of Caste*

Many of us in the Triratna Buddhist Community share this perspective, which we have learned from our own teacher, Ugyen Sangharakshita, and we are deeply inspired by Dr Ambedkar's teaching and work. What we want to see is the Dharma brought to bear on social, political, and economic questions everywhere. We want the power of the Dharma to transform not only us, but the whole of society. We want to help bring about a Dharma Revolution.

But what does this mean? When I talk about allowing the power of the Dharma to transform us and society, what do I mean, very specifically, by the Dharma and what is its 'power'? We could broadly say that the Dharma is the truth – the way things truly are. If we can see the truth and allow it to guide our actions, even one might say work through us, it represents a kind of force that shapes our thoughts, words, and deeds for the benefit of all.

This requires closer, if brief, examination in more precise Dharmic terms. The Dharma is the truth, the way things are, the true nature of existence, and that can be understood in terms of the three *lakshanas* – everything is impermanent, nothing has substantial identity, and nothing that is impermanent and insubstantial can offer enduring pleasure, satisfaction, or fulfilment. We can express this also in terms of the more fundamental principle of *pratitya samutpada*, dependent arising – everything is conditioned: there is no phenomenon, external or internal, that does not arise from previous conditions and provide the conditions for future events. Reality consists of conditioned arising.

The Principles of Karma and Dharma

Within the overall principle of conditionality, there are two aspects that, from the point of view of personal transformation and the transformation of society, are especially significant: the Karmic and the Dharmic kinds of conditionality – known in Buddhist tradition as the Karma and Dharma 'Niyamas', meaning law in the sense of a scientific law. It is in the working of these two laws that the Dharma's power to transform lies.

The law or principle of Karma is concerned with the operation of conditionality within the sphere of individualised consciousness and it states the dynamics of the interaction between a self-conscious individual and the external world. Skilful actions – actions performed with a helpful state of mind – lead to inner fulfilment and a smoother path through life. Actions performed with hatred and greed and out of unawareness lead to increasing suffering – a sense of frustration

and stultification, and also a rough ride in life. The Karmic is then the sphere of moral action. If you act taking Karma into consideration that will lead to your own consciousness arising in more and more subtle, sensitive, and highly positive forms, ultimately capable of directly seeing the true nature of things. And, of course, acting in harmony with Karma means that you will benefit all who come in contact with you.

But Karma only take us so far. There is a deeper principle that transcends our merely personal efforts, leading us far further, beyond our narrow selfhood towards Enlightenment. This kind of conditionality emerges decisively at the pinnacle of our Karmic efforts, which have led to our conscious experience emerging in an increasingly open and selfless way. We begin to realise that the apparent fixity and clarity of self identity is really quite fluid and indefinable. At that peak of Karmic development, we gain insight into the nature of our experience, seeing that the idea of self is simply a linguistic convenience that refers to no permanent, isolated reality.

Indeed, we recognise that we need no such notion. We do not have to will in the old self-referential way and we gradually relinquish our selfish clinging. A new kind of motivation then takes over, as the Dharma emerges more and more fully within our experience. We enter the 'Stream of the Dharma', flowing spontaneously onwards, beyond our self-oriented desires. This is the Dharmic mode of conditionality, the Dharma Niyama, which gradually replaces the Karmic kind, expressing itself in increasingly compassionate activity and leading us towards Buddhahood.

These two, the Karma principle and the Dharma principle, are deep in the nature of things. They are not merely conceptual constructions, added onto experience; they are not just ideas about life: they are to be discovered in life itself. Just as the law of gravity can be discovered by observing the fall of an apple, we can discover the laws of Karma and of Dharma. Just as the law of gravity only awaited a Newton to name it and describe it, even though it had always operated upon us, the Buddha discovered Karma and Dharma principles in life, as potentialities always ready to be discerned.

We too can recognise the Karma principle working in our own experience, as we notice that skilful action leads to a greater sense of fulfilment – and indeed that unskilful action brings pain and frustration. We can see that, as we act more and more in accordance with moral principles, our own consciousnesses become more open, sensitive, and awake.

In the same way, we can discover Dharmic conditionality at work, as we allow it to unfold within us, letting it move us, we might say, beyond ourselves. We can see that principle most clearly exemplified by great beings, especially by the Buddha himself. We can see in his life and in the lives of his great disciples that there is a stream of conditionality that, once fully entered into, leads inevitably onward to complete Enlightenment - the transcendence of all our suffering and the spontaneous unfolding of compassionate activity.

So, when I speak of bringing the power of the Dharma to bear on the social, political, and economic situation, what I mean is bringing the principle of Karma and the principle of Dharma to bear within society so that they transform it in a progressive direction, thereby bringing greater and greater happiness and freedom and fellowship to more and more people. This is the Dharma revolution.

How are we to bring Karma and Dharma to bear in society? What strategy should we adopt for bringing them to bear? How do we launch the Dharma revolution? I suggest that there are three particular target areas that Buddhists should focus on, each requiring a somewhat different approach.

The Marginalized and Disadvantaged

First of all, we must bring the Dharma to bear on those who are marginalized and disadvantaged within society, because this is where change is most urgently needed. Dr. Ambedkar himself began here: he brought the Dharma to bear on his own people, the Dalits ('Downtrodden') of India. And what the Dharma did for them was initially mainly at the level of Karma. They learned from the Buddha that they were human beings, like everybody else. They were not to be defined by some cosmic myth, but by the personal moral responsibility they took, by their human capacity for ethical conduct³⁷. The Buddha says that what makes you an outcast, an 'untouchable', is not your birth, but your deeds – your moral worth. You're only an untouchable if you refuse to live by ethical principles. Conversely, you're only a brahmin, not because your parents were brahmins, but because you act skilfully, because your actions are genuinely helpful, both to yourself and to others³⁸.

³⁷ According to Hindu tradition, different castes were created from different parts of the Cosmic Man's body: Brahmins from his mouth and Untouchables from the soles of his feet.

³⁸ *Vasala Sutta*, Sutta Nipata 1.7

Those who are poor, marginalized, excluded, or subject to prejudice need to hear the Dharma's most basic message: they are human beings, equal to all others in the most important sense of being morally responsible. Their dignity and their strength is to be found in accepting responsibility for their own lives and acting in accordance with ethical principles to be found within Karmic conditionality. Understanding this, they will gain the power and the courage to help themselves – not passively waiting for others to help them, but lifting themselves up and making for themselves a better life through skilful, responsible action.

This is not merely abstract theory; it is very practical. Recognising their Karmic responsibility, people begin to say, 'It is not my fault that I live in a slum, but my slum is my responsibility. I won't wait for others, I will do something about it myself. I will try to solve my own problems. I will do my best to clear things up myself. I will get together with my fellow sufferers for our common good.' Of course, helping yourself includes demanding that the government does what it is supposed to do for you. It may be necessary to insist on your legal and constitutional rights. You may have to seek help from those who can give it. But, from first to last, you take responsibility yourself, rather than passively waiting for things to change or giving up initiative to others.

Dr. Ambedkar expressed this spirit in his principal political and social slogan:

'Educate, Agitate, Organise' – fight ignorance, which is both effect and cause of exclusion, by getting an education for yourselves and your children; agitate, in the sense of struggle actively for a better life, through economic, social, political, and legal action; organise yourselves so that you are united and can work together to get what you need and what you deserve as human beings.

I can bear personal witness to the transformative power of the Dharma on poor and marginalised people in India. For so many centuries Dalits haven't been accepted as fellow citizens by others, but those groups who converted to Buddhism fifty years ago, especially in Maharashtra State, are taken very seriously these days, because they have made something of themselves. When such people really engage with the Dharma, others have to start taking them seriously, because they have become substantial and impressive human beings. They are not going to let themselves be pushed around, they live honourably, and they make a success of their own lives.

More recently, I have seen this transformative power of the Dharma exemplified in the work that some of our Dharmamitras are doing in Hungary among Roma or Gypsies. They have formed a branch of the Triratna Buddhist Community called the Jai Bhim Religious Network, which already offers some substantial evidence of that power, even though it is still early days for their work.³⁹ The way the Dharma supports our Roma brothers and sisters there in their struggle to make something of their lives is very impressive – especially their struggle to get an education and to take responsibility for their own environment. Our friends run schools for Roma, both young and old, who have been unable to connect with the school system run by the state, often because of active discrimination, even exclusion.

Of course most do not yet know much about Buddhism, but they are affected indirectly by the Buddha's message of Karmic responsibility. As a result of their contact with our Dharmamitras and the message they hear coming from Dr. Ambedkar and the Buddha, they're beginning to take more responsibility for their own lives. They are not just waiting for handouts, they're trying to make something of their own lives.

There is so much need for this message, all over the world. Even in a country like Britain, which is really very wealthy by world standards, there are many people who still need to hear this basic message of the Dharma. Perhaps we should not expect many to become Buddhists, but at least they should hear the fundamental Buddhist message: 'You are a human being; you are responsible for yourself; your future is in your own hands. If you act in a dignified, human way, you will get satisfaction, your life will be better.'

We need to look around us and ask ourselves: 'Where in my own environment is there marginalization, where is there poverty – cultural poverty, if not economic poverty?' For instance, we have strong evidence of cultural poverty in the appeal that right wing nationalism, with a strong racist tinge, has in Britain. It's relatively small time at the moment in political terms, but it's something to take very seriously, especially because that sort of bigoted nationalism

³⁹ They call themselves the Jai Bhim Network to emphasise their identification with Indian Dalits, since they occupy a comparable position in European society. 'Jai Bhim' is the perennial slogan of Dr Ambedkar's followers in India, used as a greeting. Dr Ambedkar's first name was 'Bhimrao' and 'Jai' means 'victory' – so 'Jai Bhim' means 'Victory to Dr Ambedkar' – or one might say, 'Success to the Dharma Revolution'. For more information see www.jaibhim.hu.

flourishes in times of economic difficulty. So who votes for them? Usually, it's poor, white, working-class people who have very little of anything really uplifting or inspiring in their lives, but only the example from their televisions of what they're not getting. We need to think about how the Dharma can reach them.

We might think about our local Dharma centre – what's it got to do with those people? Well, probably very little, so let us see if we can make it have something to do with them. Let's try to see what is it in the Dharma that might touch them and the situation they are in. The Dharma is the medicine for all ills. This is what the Buddha called it: the *Dhammosadha*, the medicine of the Dharma. It satisfies all genuine needs, cures all sickness. So what are their needs? What is it that's burning them? What in the Dharma could heal them? It may be that they need quite straightforward material help. Let us give that, if we can. But let us try to get beyond the superficial problem to the deeper attitudes that prevent them from dealing with their own problems. How can the Dharma help them to be bigger and better and far more fulfilled as human beings (and, among other things, not vote for racist parties!). We need to be much more intelligent, much more active: going out, carefully investigating the situation people are in, and trying to bring the Dharma to them.

We Buddhists in the West tend to come from a very narrow section of society – most of us come from middle-class, educated backgrounds, or we've become middle-class and educated, if we weren't by birth, so to speak. Our attitudes are, by and large, formed by our experience, and it's difficult for us to place ourselves in the position of people who have a very different outlook on life. And so we tend to attract people like us to our centres. We need to reflect on this. Buddhism is not just for the middle or upper classes – that's what Dr. Ambedkar proved. Buddhism is also for the uneducated, the uncultured, the illiterate, the underclass – it's for everybody. And if it's not getting through, then maybe it's because we are not thinking boldly, dynamically, and intelligently enough.

Perhaps, to be rather provocative, we could even think in terms of 'selling' the Dharma – why should we be afraid of this metaphor or refuse to learn from the commercial world, at least in certain respects? If you want to sell soap, you must find out what need people have that your product will fulfil, and then you tell them that in the most convincing way possible – of course this should not be mere rhetoric: it should really do what it says on the label, otherwise, ethical considerations apart, people will not buy it again or

recommend it to others. We need to find out how the Dharma fits the needs that people have.

This will require us to look very radically at what we do. It is quite likely that if we look at the town or region where our Centre is there will be big neighbourhoods from which hardly anyone ever comes through the Centre door. We must then ask, how can we get to them? What is the Dharma food that we can offer them that they will want to taste and that will satisfy their hunger?

We should not think that people from less educated backgrounds are not accessible to religion. Actually, they're the cannon-fodder of religion, the world over. Much religion feeds upon such people, in sometimes quite unpleasant ways, playing on their misery and their illusions. Of course we do not want to use unskilful means to attract people – the ends do not justify the means, in this case: rather, unskilful means of propagation negate the Dharma. But nonetheless we need a somewhat different approach. If we are to reach the great majority of people it is not going to be through the rather tame, reasonable, calm, take-it-or-leave-it religion, perhaps, that we all know and love – it's going to have to be something much more emphatic, much more convinced and much more glorious. Buddhism has got things to say to people that we don't usually stress – for instance, we are often rather apologetic about rebirth: 'Well, you don't have to believe it, but this is what the tradition teaches...'. Yet, there are people who want to hear about that, even perhaps need to hear about it, and our rather trimmed-down, sceptical, rationalized, tame, middle-class version doesn't even get to most middle-class, tame people!

It occurs to me that there is a class of people commonly found in the developed world who are definitely helped to lead better lives by an understanding of Karma: those who suffer from stress, depression, chronic pain, or addiction. In the economic, political, or social sense, relatively few such people could be said to be disadvantaged or marginalised, indeed many are well-educated and have good jobs, yet they certainly are at a disadvantage. We know, from work that some of our Order members are already doing, that mindfulness training can be very effective indeed in helping people to resolve difficulties of these kinds. Through mindfulness one learns to recognise and change the Karmic patterns within the mind itself and thus to free oneself from painful conditioning. This is an important contribution to society.

So we need to look carefully and see what people's needs are and where the Dharma can touch them and then offer them something that is much more lively, much more all-embracing, much more emphatic and convinced, that really can satisfy them.

Attitudes in Society

The second target we need to consider is the outlook and attitudes generally held in our societies. In the modern West, and increasingly in many other parts of the world as well, the dominant outlook is thoroughly materialist, in the philosophical sense – in other words, not in practice giving importance to anything other than matter, consciousness being treated as a mere momentary glow on the surface of matter that burns out when the body dies. That nihilistic materialism finds practical expression in 'possessive individualism' – familiar to us as the consumerism that drives so many people's lives. These are the broad views that most people hold, consciously or unconsciously, in Western society today.

The strange thing is that many such people will profess some religious views, even in thoroughly post-Christian Western Europe. But everywhere one sees that the real values motivating most people's actions are completely consumerist, therefore materialist – in spite of any professed religious outlook. Perhaps this is not surprising. A modern economy in the developed world delivers a steadily improving standard of living – or does so until the system runs into trouble, which is conceived as a short-term mistake that someone should fix. Even in this present time of economic crisis, most people in the developed world nonetheless experience a standard of living unimaginable even to their immediate ancestors. Furthermore, it seems that mastery of our world through technology is really possible and that, given time, science will deliver us solutions to all our problems. After all, I read recently that some geneticists have been able to arrest the ageing process in certain mice.... All this means that the material world seems very convincingly real and potentially satisfactory. And if it isn't satisfactory right now somebody is to blame – probably the government, or the system, or the banks – and it will soon be put right.

These attitudes amount to what Nietzsche called 'passive nihilism', towards which he saw Western society drifting, even in his time. There is no perspective beyond this material world, no upward gaze. God is definitely dead, but we're just trying to get a little bit of

pleasure, while being as inoffensive to each other as we can, and accepting that that is all there is – until the final curtain falls.

This materialistic consumerism eats away at our sense of higher values, for there is not much space for idealism when there is nothing more than accidental physical existence. Ideals and values have therefore come to be viewed with cynicism by many people and similarly there is a deep suspicion of leaders of all kinds or of any sense of moral hierarchy. I remember once giving a talk about the Buddha as the pinnacle and standard of human development and afterwards somebody contended with me very indignantly that that was not the proper way to talk: the Buddha was not more developed than anybody else, he was merely *differently* developed! (In the face of such obstinate relativism, there seemed little to be gained from arguing – all I could do was assert, ‘No: more developed!’)

This suspicion of idealism and of leaders is, however, partly an understandable and even positive development, for the chronicles of the twentieth century reveal the appalling destructive potential of ideology and authoritarianism. Indeed, there is a longer history to this rejection of oppressive hierarchy in the West: a keynote of the last two or three hundred years has been a revolt against the abuses of the Church, the inequity and waste of aristocracy and absolute monarchy, the injustice of imperialism and colonialism, and so forth.

But our revulsion at all that, justified as it may be, often combines with our materialism to leave us cynical of anything that suggests any moral elevation at all. We're left with a very limited ethical relativism that is easily subverted by more confident, and perhaps less reasonable, beliefs – as many good liberals find today, faced with fundamentalisms of various kinds. Buddhists in the modern Western world are up against these nihilist, materialist, consumerist, relativist attitudes and the cynicism that goes with them, and if we want to transform society, that is primarily what we need to tackle.

And they do need tackling. The consequence of these attitudes is an increasingly shallow and unsatisfying existence, whose meaning lies largely in consumption. Even if people in the developed world can enjoy a material well-being beyond the imagining of the poor and marginalised of the world, they often suffer nonetheless, although in a quite different way: estranged from any sense of community, alienated from natural experience, and burdened by soulless work. It is ironic that the poor and marginalised of a Gypsy ghetto can, in my own experience, seem more truly alive and

authentically human than the privileged denizens of the London suburbs. This empty way of life is also, of course, unsustainable: economically, environmentally, and psychologically. Many feel this very deeply, but that is not enough: we must do something about it.

How do we change it? Dr Ambedkar himself made this very clear in a talk he gave just weeks before he died: 'The greatest thing the Buddha taught the world is that the world can only be reformed by reforming the mind of Man'.⁴⁰ The problem lies in our minds: more particularly in the interpretation that we give to our lives. The way we understand things at the most fundamental level has a major effect upon how we act. People's actions emerge out of their view of life. Their ethics stand upon their philosophy, in the deepest sense, even if that philosophy is not articulated or consistent or, perhaps, even fully conscious – or even if their real guiding views are at odds with their professed beliefs.

It is this understanding, view, or underlying philosophy that we need to encourage people to transform. If people are to act differently and live a more satisfying life, individually and collectively, they need a very different way of understanding themselves and their experience, a new perspective on their place in the human community, indeed in existence itself. There needs, therefore, to be a reform of the mind on a wide scale and this is task of the Dharma revolution.

Our task then is to proclaim the Dharma as a truly new and more satisfying vision. We need to communicate as widely as we can the Dharma's fundamental perspective on the way things are: dependently arising, without permanent essence. We need to get across the progressive trend in conditionality, the two 'spiral' principles of Karma and of Dharma, which bring ever increasing happiness and fulfilment if we cooperate with them. First, we need to show how Karma can work to our advantage: inner satisfaction comes from the way you think, the way you speak, the way you act. Through acting skilfully your own mind opens up and becomes more sensitive to the deeper current of things and that brings a growing fulfilment and a far greater sense of meaning. Then we need to get across that the Dharma is a potentiality within life that unfolds when you align yourself fully with it and that will lead you to the highest possible fulfilment – for us, embodied in the figure of the Buddha.

⁴⁰ *The Buddha and Karl Marx*

The Dharma is the truth about the way things are. It is the truth that morality is natural, based on the natural principle of Karma. It should therefore be discoverable through observation and it is significant that there has recently been research, by both economists and psychologists, into what it is that makes people happy. An economist from the London School of Economics, Prof. Richard Layard, has written a very interesting book, *Happiness*, that sets out some of the latest research on the subject. These scientific findings seem more or less to confirm what the Buddha said about Karma, although not at all in those terms.

By and large, what seems to be demonstrated is that, once basic needs are met, what makes people happy is the values they hold, the beneficial activity they engage in, and the quality of their human relationships.

Of course, it is difficult to be happy when you are in economic difficulties or when you are very insecure in one way or another. Material development and economic and political stability certainly do bring an increasing chance of happiness when you live in poverty and uncertainty. But once you have a modest income and stable circumstances, the more you get the less increase in well-being you experience: it seems there is statistical evidence to show that people in USA and in Western Europe have generally not become any happier over the last fifty years, despite real income per head more than doubling.⁴¹

It seems then that increasing wealth itself does not always bring more happiness. For happiness to grow once basic prosperity has been attained, some other factors must enter the picture. Dr. Ambedkar himself makes precisely this point – that it's certainly true that poverty generally brings unhappiness, but it's not true that material wealth necessarily brings happiness: happiness comes then from the culture of the mind and is governed chiefly by our moral worth, not merely by our circumstances.

In communicating the Dharma, we're just talking about what is. We are setting before people the facts: the highest potentialities of our lives unfold naturally in accordance with moral laws, which are implicit in the way things are. We're not requiring them to believe something they can't investigate – some myth dressed as history. The Dharma simply asks us to recognise that reality works in ways that

⁴¹ Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, London, 2005, p.29 ff.

we can verify for ourselves by looking at our own experience. This is what we're trying to get across: truths that are accessible to all.

The reality of things directly implies certain ethical and spiritual standards and these we need to assert in the face of the prevailing cynicism and relativism. And it is important that we do, in the end, have the conviction to *assert*. We must present our values and principles as reasonably as possible, but we should also make it clear that we do truly believe in them and that means we live by them, however imperfectly. Our argument should combine reason, passionate conviction, and exemplification – even if it is but the example of one struggling to live by those values despite repeated failures. We should not merely argue, we should 'bear witness' to our values and principles.

The importance of confidence needs stressing. We need to be convinced by those principles ourselves and to have the confidence to assert them within society, applying them to current social, political, and economic issues. If we do have that confidence that in itself will have an affect. I have been surprised, at times, by the power of such confidence, which can be the decisive factor in many situations. People are often looking for something to have confidence in and many will respond if they hear genuine values expressed with conviction. Of course, it must again be emphasised that we should communicate our values reasonably, but reason should not preclude even a degree of passion if we want people to take what we say seriously.

We need to let the Buddhist voice be heard, proclaiming the Dharma strongly, clearly, confidently. For instance, we need to let our politicians hear the voice of the Dharma. Their policies and actions may not directly be much affected by what we may say, but when something is asserted cogently and confidently it rings in the air, it enters the collective discourse, so to speak, and it will have its effect. Again I have been very struck by the fact that people often may not like what you say, but they may nonetheless be strongly influenced by it – and even come to adopt it themselves, albeit without acknowledgement perhaps. If we believe in the power and truth of the Dharma and we assert it with reason and conviction, something of it remains echoing in the atmosphere, even if people don't appear to listen very carefully at the time.

We should, I suggest, get hold of our politicians at election time – they want our votes, so for a brief period it is in their interests to pay attention to what we say. Perhaps we could invite them to our

Dharma centre, and ask them some searching questions. We could face them with the moral principles we want them to answer to, and get them to say what they think. They will then do what they consider best, of course, regardless of what has passed in our conversations with them, but at least they've heard something of the Buddhist point of view and that may influence them to some extent. And there will be some who are sympathetic to our point of view – after all good people do go into politics, wanting to make a difference for their fellow citizens, and such people may respond to us. When we have weighed and tested them, let us vote for the ones who appear most to appreciate Dharmic principles and to uphold policies that seem most in tune with the Dharma – or at worst least out of tune with it.

However, we need to speak to politics all the time. We should continue to try to influence our national and regional or city politicians in any way we can that is line with our principles. It is probably not wise, under present circumstances, to stand for election oneself at that level, because it would be very difficult to remain true to one's commitments as a Buddhist if one did: for a start, in most modern democracies, that would entail accepting a party ticket and thus at times subordinating your own principles to party discipline. But it is possible to enter politics at a local level on a non-party basis, as some Order members and Mitras have already successfully done. Then you can deal with the issues that arise on the basis of your Buddhist principles without any ethical compromise.

Again, we need to use the media to let the Buddhist voice be heard. Those of us who have skill with the pen, the keyboard, or the camera, or with any other medium, need to use our talents to put across the Dharmic perspective on current issues. For instance, Vishvapani is doing some very good broadcasts for *Thought for the Day* on the BBC's Radio Four. I strongly recommend these to anybody wants to hear a really effective example of what a Buddhist can do, in this respect. They are skilful and sophisticated applications of Buddhist principles in a way that really does stand out, even in comparison with some of the very witty and intelligent speakers from other religions who appear on the programme. Of course, this is a specifically 'religious' slot and we should not allow the Buddhist voice to be confined to that rather minority interest. We should find outlets that have far wider appeal.

This is an important consideration: we need to make sure we speak not just among ourselves, or to people like us. We too easily think of going to the margins: the alternative, the radical

environmentalists and so forth. Of course we've got to reach such people and they are, in some ways, a natural constituency – but we need also to get the Buddhist voice heard in the mainstream of society. We should address the issues on which the Buddhist voice has got something distinctive to say that could influence the way people think. We should use the mainstream media, as well as the established political processes, using whatever opportunities arise or making opportunities, so long as we do not in any way compromise our basic principles.

Let me give an example that struck me some years ago: there's been something of a debate in Britain about what it is to be British. Such a large proportion of the population consists of people who have immediate ancestors who weren't born in these islands – what then is their relationship to Britain? What is it to be a British citizen today? It is clearly not the delightfully dotty vision offered by a former Prime Minister, John Major, who talked of warm beer and long shadows on the village green and the sound of leather on willow. It's a gentle, nostalgic image, but it isn't most people's experience today of what it is to be British, even to be English – if it ever was. So what is it, especially when the political entity consists of four historical nations with their own strong identities? Surely Buddhism has something to say about this, because a nation made up of such a variety of cultural identities cannot be bound together merely by history, since that history must by definition exclude some others who are now citizens. The binding force must be found in certain common values, beyond any one religion, values that are universal, but that find a particular expression in these islands.

We need to identify the principles that underlie British citizenship, which must nowadays go beyond the particularities of blood and birth or of religion. Buddhists will surely have something very important to say about that.

To give a more pressing instance of the issues we must address: we need to speak about how the economy works, asking whether it is producing genuine well-being for most citizens. All the measurements used by most governments today are usually about economic growth – that's the only value... 'Britain is just getting back on track because the economy grew by 0.2% this quarter.' It is not enough, of course, it needs to grow more, because the whole thing works on growth in productivity! It can of course only continue to work at certain costs, notably human costs, which occasionally will become apparent, as has happened very recently.

We need to be saying very loudly that this is not the way to measure the success of a society or nation. We shouldn't be measuring it simply on whether it is growing in economic terms or not – we should be looking to other values. We should be asking our politicians how they evaluate the success of the nation. Against what will they be assessing the success of their policies? Will they be looking at whether people generally have an increased sense of happiness, fulfilment, satisfaction, whether people are growing in general human qualities, in moral worth, and in creativity? Are they going to measure the cultural and spiritual development of the nation? Or is the measure simply going to be whether or not they have access to more consumer goods? Fortunately, these questions are being asked a little these days, even in mainstream politics, but that voice needs strengthening and Buddhists have much to say about this. We need to put forward an alternative vision of growth – growth in values, in fulfilment, in creativity.

So far I have spoken of the larger social and political context, but much of what needs to be done is more local and particular. Issues arise all the time in our own neighbourhoods that would benefit from Buddhists being directly engaged. For instance, I have been doing the little I can to help my neighbours in the Welsh parish where I have my hermitage to keep their Welsh-speaking primary school open. I am doing it because I believe that it is a factor in preserving a still-intact local community against the assaults of an increasingly rootless society. In my small contributions I have been able to communicate something of the principles I believe to be at stake and my neighbours seem to appreciate that. There are many, many such issues around us, which give us the opportunity to act on and communicate our Buddhist values – and thereby contribute to the Dharma revolution. Even if we do not have the gifts to appear before the public at large, we can all be expressing our Buddhist values to those we meet; with imagination and even a certain rhetorical colour, coming from our strong feeling for the Dharma.

People need to hear the Buddhist point of view because it brings so much clarity and depth to the issues that confront people. If we do all work together more vigorously in various different ways we can make sure that the voice of the Dharma is heard throughout society. Then the attitudes and outlook that underlie the present unsatisfactory state of things will begin change. There will begin to be something like a Dharma Revolution.

It must, however, be admitted that we Buddhists have, as yet, done all too little to bring this about in the modern world.

People who Aspire to a Higher Human Life

Our first two targets are principally concerned with Karmic processes, at least as we have so far presented them. We are encouraging the disadvantaged and marginalised to recognise the power of Karma. That means recognising that, whatever the causes of their suffering, they can play a large part in ending it by taking responsibility for their own actions. The same goes for our second target: the attitudes and outlook of people in society as a whole. In trying to get the Buddhist point of view across in this context we are principally trying to awaken people to the truth of Karma. We are seeking to apply an understanding of the operations of Karma to social, economic, and political questions. However, Karma is only one progressive kind of conditionality. There are also those processes that come under the heading of the Dharma Niyama, and it is the application of the Dharma Niyama conditionality that is at issue in addressing our third target.

So, what are these Dharma Niyama processes? In a phrase one could say that they are the natural potentiality for Buddhahood within reality. That potentiality begins to reveal itself in a decisive way once Karmic processes have been developed to a high degree, establishing the conditions for its arising. Working with Karma can take us to the point at which we see through the illusion of a real, separate, permanent ego identity and thus stop grasping at the idea of self. What then flows from within us is the 'Stream of the Dharma' – a succession of states, each conditioning the arising of the next, that are not based on ego-clinging: taking us from greater clarity, freedom, love, and joy to yet greater still. This spiral of spiritual progress arises now independently of ego volition and, insofar as it is less and less connected with self, it is less and less selfish – it is a stream of non-egoistic, compassionate motivation and activity, arising entirely spontaneously.

This stream of Dharmic conditionality is an ever-present potentiality of human consciousness. In a sense, it is pulling at us all the time, but our self-preoccupation prevents us even from recognising it – and so we are ignorant of it. Yet some people do directly feel its pull, often as an inchoate call to something more. Perhaps there are many such people. I remember Ugyen Sangharakshita once saying, after looking around while on the London Underground, that he thought roughly one in ten people felt this sort of urge to higher fulfilment to a significant degree. You can recognise something in the eye of such people, a look that suggests

they want more from life – not merely in the sense of worldly ambitions, but some greater value and meaning.

Maybe everyone feels a sense of existential dissatisfaction sometimes; perhaps everyone wakes up in the middle of the night sometimes and asks themselves, 'Isn't there more to life than this?' The ordinary life most people live can be quite happy, but it does not seem enough to give us real and lasting satisfaction or to fulfil our true potential as human beings. Everyone perhaps feels that disquieting, questioning breeze at the back of their thoughts from time to time, particularly in their youth, but there are those who cannot forget it, who cannot ignore it. They know that there must be something more and cannot rest easy without it. We need to be appealing to them in a very powerful and direct way, letting them know we share their calling and that we have found that fuller, richer life for ourselves in the Buddha-Dharma and that we are trying to live in accordance with the higher values it expresses so purely.

It is our task to reach such people and give them the encouragement and opportunity they need. It is a profound relief to anyone who senses this disquiet to discover that others feel it too – for, so often, such existential dissatisfaction is seen as a problem, and may even be pathologised. It is a far greater relief still to find, not only do you share that sense of wanting something more with others, but that it is possible to devote your life to seeking its fulfilment. And it is the most wonderful joy of all to discover that some have sought and found and have taught the Path that can be followed, even by you. We need to reach such people and welcome them into the Sangha of those who are not satisfied with ordinary life and seek a higher meaning through following the Buddha-Dharma.

Whilst this task of reaching such people primarily benefits each of them as an individual, it has very important implications for society in general and is thus in itself a significant contribution to the Dharma Revolution. There is first of all what might be described as a negative reason. If people who feel that call to a higher life do not find a way of answering it, what happens to the energy of their impulse? William Blake says, 'He who nurses unacted desires breeds pestilence'⁴² – by desires meaning here impulses to creativity – 'arrows of desire'. If a society represses the creative impulses of its citizens, that energy may curdle and sicken, turning either into life-denying depression or a bitter rebelliousness. Unacted desires will

⁴² *Proverbs of Hell*.

find their outlet, if not in creative, then in destructive forms. It is essential for the general health and stability of society that those who feel an urge to a higher, more meaningful life are not prevented from following it.

Simply giving freedom to those who feel this higher call is vital for the well-being, even the survival, of society. However, if positive encouragement and active support is given, that will be even more beneficial. Those who live out the quest for greater meaning thereby establish higher values for society as a whole. Shelley famously spoke of poets as the 'unacknowledged legislators of mankind'⁴³, and this metaphor could be extended to the creative in general, especially those who follow the spiritual path in its higher reaches. Humanity needs people who are trying to live a creative life, serving ideals that go beyond self-clinging, because this keeps those higher values alive for all and thus opens up larger moral, aesthetic, and spiritual vistas for all. When no one lives on the mountaintops only the dark and muddy floor of the valley seems real.

This is particularly true in modern democracies, which can all too easily become mere arenas for self-interested competition. That will then be played out on the geopolitical stage in nationalistic rivalries, making it impossible to share the world's resources in an equitable and sustainable way. There needs to be a sense of something beyond our narrow self-concerns, whether individual or collective, something of a higher moral and spiritual nature. There needs to be some leaven in society, that lifts us beyond our selfishness. If society does not have that upward element, it cannot have true justice and freedom and the world will be a very dangerous place.

This cannot not however be a matter of mere rhetoric. This higher life needs to be *seen* to be lived if it is to have any effect upon society. The more people there are in society who live out moral, aesthetic, and spiritual values the better for society as a whole. A truly healthy society would, then, not merely license those who wished to live in tune with the progressive trend in reality, it would provide active support and encouragement to artists of all kinds, thinkers, social activists, and spiritual voyagers. For instance, although not all that goes by the name of art really does serve the progressive current, nonetheless it is vital that support is given to the arts, both by the state and by individuals, because many engaged in the arts do very genuinely struggle to answer a call to something

⁴³ *A Defense of Poetry*.

more. And it is perhaps even more vital that the state provides legal and even financial support to those who wish to lead a full-time spiritual life, of whatever kind – at least economic support in the sense of tax relief and the like. This, incidentally, is one of the issues on which we need to question our politicians: do they consider it important to provide incentives to those leading a 'higher' life, to put it that way, whether through art or spiritual endeavour.

In the Buddhist context, it is the Sangha or spiritual community of those committed to the Dharma life that especially needs valuing and supporting. It provides an example of a way of life based entirely on different and higher principles, upholding moral values that can ennoble the entire community. The Sangha is thus of very great significance to society.

Of our three target areas, this is the one that we in the Triratna Buddhist Community most easily identify with and are, perhaps, best at working in – no doubt because that is where many of us ourselves fit in. We could of course do so much better: there are many, many people who do not hear of Buddhism and do not get encouragement to live a real Dharma life, lacking the understanding, tools, or encouragement to do so.

The Nucleus of a New Society

I have suggested that we work in three target areas so that we can help to bring about the Dharma Revolution. Firstly, we can show those who are marginalized and deprived – especially economically deprived or socially excluded, but also culturally, even psychologically, deprived – what they can do to change their situation. Then we can make the Buddhist voice heard in the mainstream of society, as much as we can, so as to change the attitudes and outlook most people hold. And thirdly we can try to get the Buddhist message to those who are wanting, sometimes desperately longing for, a higher life.

If we can reach these three targets to any extent, we will make a very significant contribution to the creation of a new society – one might even say of a Pure Land, here on this Earth. But this is not an easy task: many with noble ideals and lofty intentions have tried and failed, sometimes creating the very reverse of what was intended. We need then a practicable and effective plan for carrying it out. Urgyen Sangharakshita has here a distinctive strategy, based firmly on traditional principles, the implementing of which has been the principal project of the Triratna Community since it was founded and

that always inspires its activities. He argues that we need first to create the basis for engaging in the Dharma Revolution: we need to establish what he calls, 'the nucleus of a new society'. In the midst of the old society, we need to create miniature new societies: situations in which people live and work together on the basis of the Dharma. From those 'new societies in miniature', we can go out to transform the larger society around us.

There are three principal functions of these nuclei: supporting those who are already committed to the Dharma, exemplifying what the wider society could become, and providing points of contact for those who are exploring the Dharma life.

Support for those who are already committed to the Dharma:

If we are to do this work of creating a new society, a great deal of energy and strength is needed. Few of us have that strength on our own – perhaps only the Buddha had it completely, and that is what enabled him to fulfil a Buddha's function of bringing unaided the light of the Dharma where there had previously been only darkness. Dr. Ambedkar definitely had strength of that kind – and he needed it: he had to fight alone and stand alone. In one of his meetings with Sangharakshita, he commented that he was the most unpopular man in India. Even his own lieutenants were against his conversion to Buddhism and tried to talk him out of it on the day before it took place. You have to be a real lion to stand alone like that. Urgyen Sangharakshita, in the early days of his return to England, had to stand alone in a similar way. But such people are rare – and no doubt would not have chosen to be alone if there had been any other alternative. It really is very, very difficult.

If we are to help bring about the Dharma Revolution by carrying out these three tasks, we ourselves need support, at least until we're so strong that nothing can stop us – that is, when Stream Entry arises. Till then, in order to keep going, we need to feel we're working alongside some other people. We need to involve ourselves in a living community or society where our aspiration is matched by others, who do not merely mouth superficial rhetoric but genuinely live out the values we share, preferably even live them out to a greater extent than we do.

It's so dispiriting when, yourself fired by the Dharma, you try to communicate it to others, but they just aren't interested – they simply argue or your words fall flat. At times one will inevitably lose heart

and that is when one needs companions who can empathise with one's difficulties, but who will also re- inspire one.

You need that sort of support and companionship, otherwise it is very difficult to maintain momentum. In my work for the Order and movement, over the years, I've so often had to watch people losing their aspiration because they just didn't get the support they needed. You see people come along to a Centre with such strong and genuine idealism, wanting to make a real contribution. But life's currents carry them away: you meet them later and they say, 'I just could not sustain it. I never lost my desire to create a better world, to live out higher values, but I couldn't sustain it. The circumstances I found myself in were just too much for me.' Such cautionary tales should never be forgotten – for we can be prone to overestimate ourselves, perhaps especially in the individualistic culture of the West.

I remember Sangharakshita saying of one Tibetan 'incarnate lama' who'd gone to America to spread the Dharma, that it was as if he was a bodhisattva who'd taken rebirth in a new land and then forgotten why he was there, seduced by the fascinations of America. I've known a number of Order Members who have gone somewhere new with great enthusiasm and idealism – and then rather lost their way. There's so much against us – and not just outside us, either: our own inner 'Maras', the forces of distraction and compromise in our own minds, will tempt us away.

We need support, we need a community of like-minded people around us. If we can, we need to live with or at least around people who share our aspiration. It's terribly disheartening to live with people who deny your aspiration or are simply indifferent to it. Indifference is probably a more powerful sedative than opposition: opposition sharpens your wits, rouses your energies, while indifference sends you to sleep. You slowly become passive – and join in the rat- race round and round the wheel: a very active passivity. So that this does not happen, we need to live around, and preferably work with, people who share the same aspiration, who are living out the same values, who are struggling to realise the same ideals in their lives.

We need the support of instruction and guidance, too. We need to learn from others how to live the spiritual life and to apply the Dharma to the concrete realities of daily life. We need to have frequent recourse to places where the Dharma is in plentiful supply, until the Dharma is so much part of us that we cannot lose it.

Perhaps the most important reason for the establishment of these nuclei is the sheer scale of the enterprise. The task of social transformation is limitless and requires a vast amount of energy and a wide range of talents, skills, and experience. It will only be possible to carry it out on a significant scale when many people cooperate together, pooling their efforts and their capacities. In effect, these nuclei of the new society are the basis for the creative teamwork that is needed.

If we want to transform society this is what most of us, if not all, need: the nucleus of a new society, somewhere where those who share that aspiration, can gather the support to carry it out and can combine their efforts. It's only on that basis, perhaps, that you might begin to think about political activism or engaging with the media, for instance, even at the most local level. Without that immersion in the nucleus of a new society, politics would be likely to take you over and you would get lost, as has happened to so many who started with genuine social and political aspirations, their ideals submerged in the struggle for power. You need the basis of the spiritual community to work effectively to transform society, whilst retaining your high intention.

Exemplification of what the wider society could become:

We also need the nucleus of a new society to provide an example of what the whole of society could be. Many have, for instance, been struck by their experience of particular situations they have come across in the Triratna Community. They will have gone to an urban Dharma Centre or to a place like Padmaloka or Taraloka and they will have felt something different and special in the atmosphere: in the way people relate, the welcome they give you. There's a very positive and even beautiful environment.

People often find this kind of inspiring atmosphere is created on retreat. I remember coming back from my first retreat, thinking, 'This is what life should be like – I want this all the time'. That gave me so much courage and confidence to change my life so that I could base it on the Dharma and such a strong motivation to make experiences like that available to others. We need to uphold that kind of example of what society as a whole can be, so that people believe it can be achieved and dedicate themselves to making it happen.

Such exemplification has a more subtle dimension. The fact that situations exist that do, at least to some extent, exemplify what the whole of society could be like itself has an uplifting effect – one

might almost say whether people know of them or not. Human collective life is far more sensitive and even responsive than might appear – sensitive to good influence as well as bad. The mere existence of people living together on the basis of ideals and values derived from the Dharma in some mysterious way may affect the overall texture of society. Something is asserted, something is kept alive that affects everyone, however subtly and unconsciously. Because such nuclei exist, values are kept alive and, when the circumstances are ripe, have a far wider and more effective influence – just as seeds lie dormant in the soil, sometimes for very long periods of time, until conditions come about in which they can germinate. If these nuclei of a new society can achieve no more than this, they have justified themselves – although, such a perspective should not be used to rationalise timidity or laziness!

A point of contact for those who are exploring the Dharma life:

I recently met with a group of volunteers at the London Buddhist Centre, people who once or twice a week or so come in and keep the centre clean, look after the reception, do some of the basic administration, indeed, do a lot of work in an impressively generous spirit. I am President of the centre and I was trying to thank them for their contribution, but they were saying, 'No, it is we who are grateful for this opportunity to be part of the community'. The people who live and work together around the centre much of the time build an atmosphere that these volunteers can participate in and so benefit from a collective life based on the Dharma.

This then is the third function of the nucleus of the new society. It offers opportunities for contact to those who cannot or do not want to live or work full time with Dharma brothers and sisters. Its doors are open and it shares its atmosphere in various ways, especially through Dharma classes, retreats, festivals, and other such events and situations – including opportunities for volunteering. Through contact with that new society in miniature, people can get support, guidance, and inspiration that will help them to maintain their values at other times. They can stay for a while in a kind of spiritual oasis, where they can refresh themselves. And, whenever they are ready, they can move closer to the heart of that new society, if they want to.

The nucleus of a new society may be an oasis in the midst of a desert, an oasis where can be found cool water and shade from the burning heat, but there is a danger in that. We should not simply settle down in the oasis and take our own ease for too long. The oasis

is not a retirement home: it is a base where we can find refreshment, inspiration, and support for going out into the world – for bringing about the Dharma Revolution and building the new society. Our aspiration should be to expand that oasis so that it fills the desert. Oases are essential – so many would die of thirst or burn up in the heat if there were none; so many of us would simply become dispirited because of the unending, barren sand. However, our aspiration is to transform the entire desert, the entire world, into an oasis where all can live decent, fulfilling, and beautiful lives.

In the Triratna Community we have done a lot, over the years, to set up at least a few such nuclei of a new society. But we need to create so many more and to strengthen and develop those we already have. We have so many Buddhist Centres, where people can make contact with the Dharma and around which broad communities begin to form; we have many residential communities where people can live together on the basis of the Dharma; and we have some working situations and businesses, which give remarkable opportunities for sharing a Dharma life. We have, for instance, a team-based Right Livelihood business at Windhorse:Evolution, which has people working in it from all over the world. What has been achieved so far needs to be used more fully, especially by new generations, and we need to make it available in new places to new people, otherwise we won't be able to sustain our efforts – the efforts that are needed to transform the world. We collectively will not have the necessary inspiration or strength.

Conclusion

I hope that you are convinced that the Dharma is the medicine for the ills of the world. And I hope I've persuaded you that what is needed of you is your complete confidence in it, your diligent practice of it, and your proclamation of it in the most powerful and persuasive way that you can. If we all do proclaim it in that way, the Dharma could be a major force for positive social transformation throughout the world. What needs to change is the way people understand life and the values they hold. Once they hear the Dharma and respond to its values, then society will begin to change, especially if they have the example before them of a nucleus of a new society. There is no lasting and truly worthwhile political, social, or even economic revolution without a preceding revolution in attitudes and values.

And it is our task in the Triratna Buddhist Community to help bring about that Dharma Revolution. And we do it by first

developing the nucleus of a new society and then working within the three target areas: the poor and marginalised, the general attitudes and outlook of society, and those who have heard the call to a spiritual life. Then we will be transforming the world - and at the same time, of course, we ourselves will be transformed.

A Buddhist Manifesto: the Principles of the Triratna Buddhist Community

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Foreword

by Urgyen Sangharakshita

When I founded what is now the Triratna Buddhist Community in 1967, I did so after many years experience of Buddhism in the East and some two or three of the nascent Buddhist movement in Britain. I had of course seen much that inspired me and I had met many good Buddhists and some great ones, some of whom indeed became my teachers. However, I had also witnessed much more that was corrupt or decadent and much that simply had no relevance to the modern situation. It had become clear to me that, in many respects, a completely new start was required if the Dharma was to survive at all, let alone make any impact in the contemporary world. I came to this conclusion somewhat reluctantly, being by character something of a traditionalist. But I saw no alternative. Time has only reinforced my conclusion; indeed we must, I believe, be more radical still.

As I set out on this work of renewal, I found that certain principles were becoming clear to me as a basis for it, and these guided me in establishing the Triratna Buddhist Community. I believe these principles are applicable to all who work for the Dharma today and so wanted to bring them to the attention of other Buddhists worldwide. I am, however, now unable to write much myself, being partially sighted, and so I have asked one of my senior disciples, Dharmachari Subhuti, to give a brief synopsis of the main principles on the basis of which we work, as a sort of manifesto for modern Buddhism. Subhuti has been working with me for almost forty years and knows these principles very well, both in their theoretical depth and in their practical application. What he has written does indeed well summarise what I consider to be the essential basis for the renewal of Buddhism. I therefore commend it to my own disciples and to our Buddhist brothers and sisters everywhere. May it contribute to the flourishing of the Dharma throughout the world.

Urgyen Sangharakshita,
Madhyamaloka, Birmingham, UK
3rd June 2012

I

The Principles of the Triratna Buddhist Community

The Triratna Buddhist Community was founded by Ugyen Sangharakshita, in London in 1967, as a response to the contemporary world, so different in many ways from any that Buddhists have had to face before. What follows is an outline of the main principles upon which that new Buddhist movement was initiated and which have continued to animate it ever since. This is intended as an epitome of those principles, setting them out in brief, without much supporting exposition, so that their full range can be discerned.

THE NEED FOR A RENEWAL OF BUDDHISM

The world today is very different from that in which Buddhism originated and flourished. Buddhists now practise and teach the Dharma in an age of urbanisation, globalisation, mass communication, and rapid technological change, in which scientific thinking is widespread and ideas of democratic rights are common. In addition, the influence of Buddhism in its traditional heartlands has drastically decreased, especially through the course of the twentieth century. However, opportunities for propagating the Dharma are arising in new regions, most notably in India and in the West – and everywhere there are people with a cosmopolitan outlook and questioning minds to whom the Buddhist perspective would be naturally congenial. The challenge Buddhists face today is to find ways of communicating and practising the Dharma that are truly effective in these new circumstances. **The situation seems to call for renewal in the Buddhist world, faithful to the Buddha's own teaching, yet addressing the circumstances we find ourselves in now.**

This work of renewal is very important to us in the Triratna Buddhist Order, but we know that it is not our work alone. We are aware that many other Buddhists all over the world are grappling with the same issues and we want to cooperate with them in this common task. Like all other schools and groups, we have our own distinctive approach to the teaching and practice of the Dharma, which we derive from the presentation of our teacher and founder, Ugyen Sangharakshita. At the same time we see ourselves as part of the worldwide Mahasangha of all those who go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, in whatever manner and to whatever degree.

Our teacher has arrived at certain principles, which are the basis of our own approach to the practice of Buddhism today, however partially or imperfectly we have been able to apply them so far. We think these principles of renewal may be of wider interest and application and we therefore want to share them with our Buddhist sisters and brothers as a contribution to our common work of bringing the Dharma into the heart of the world today. We hope these principles will be stimulating, at least, and we invite your reflection and comment.

II

Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

The renewal of the Buddhist world can only come about if it is faithful to the spirit and intention of the **Buddha's** own teaching. At the same time, it needs to find new ways of expressing the **Dharma** that are relevant to people today, without denying the rich variety of traditions and cultures of the Buddhist past. To carry this message of the Dharma out into the world, a nucleus of men and women is required, forming a new kind of **Sangha**, especially of effective Dharma teachers and leaders, firmly based in deep personal practice. That renewal of the Buddhist world is, in other words, a renewal of our understanding and expression of the **Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha** and a renewal of our **going for Refuge** to them. This, for us in the Triratna Buddhist Order, is the starting point.

The central and definitive act of the Buddhist life is going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. All Buddhists, probably, would acknowledge that it is by reciting the formula of going for Refuge that one becomes a Buddhist and most will regularly chant it, together with one or other list of precepts, as a centrepiece of their devotional ceremonies. It is thus what most fundamentally we have in common as Buddhists and what distinguishes us from non-Buddhists.

But going for Refuge is not merely a ceremonial recitation: it defines and expresses what it is to be a Buddhist. When we go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, we express our confidence in them and our reliance upon them as the ultimate sources of happiness and fulfilment – and we implicitly reject all other sources of confidence and reliance, whether from the world of the senses or from other views. We are not only confident in the Three Jewels, our whole Dharma life unfolds on the basis of that confidence. We **go** for Refuge to them: we actively move in the direction they imply. Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is an action, and it is repeated again and again until Enlightenment is reached.

However, initially our faith in the Three Jewels is only partial – whatever we may chant in the Dharma-hall, much of the time we look to other sources of security: people, material goods, worldly situations and status, various unquestioned views and beliefs. As we progress on the Path, our going for Refuge will move through a number of stages until it becomes complete. To begin with, our going for Refuge may simply be the expression of **cultural** values – a positive influence upon us but with little depth of personal reflection or commitment. At some point, we may catch a glimpse of the Dharma and make a temporary or **provisional**

commitment. In time that may become **effective**, as we reorganise our lives around our commitment to the Three Jewels, so that we do make consistent progress on the Path. As we go for Refuge more and more deeply, our confidence in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha becomes unshakeable and we enter the stream of the Dharma, from which we cannot fall away. This is **real** going for Refuge and, from that moment on, our progress is assured, until we ourselves become the Refuge: our going for Refuge then being **Absolute**.

Going for Refuge is thus repeated again and again at every moment of our lives, carrying us through all the stages of the Path. It is this active faith, commitment, and effort that makes up the Buddhist life and is the starting point for any renewal of Buddhism – to be constantly repeated if the momentum of that renewal is not itself to be lost.

Although going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life, different schools have drawn out important aspects of what it consists in through their own distinctive approaches. Some, for instance, have emphasised the Vinaya, others the Bodhisattva vow, others again the taking of tantric initiation, and yet others reliance on the vow of the Buddha Amitabha. All of these have their own particular relevance and meaning, enriching our understanding of the Dharma. But all find their unity as aspects and dimensions of going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Recognition of them in these terms allows us to view Buddhism as one spiritual movement and makes it easier for us to work together and to communicate a single, basic message that can be widely effective in our contemporary situation.

Buddhist renewal commences with the recognition of the central significance of going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, at every level and in every aspect of Buddhist life.

III

Going for Refuge to the Buddha

Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels begins with going for Refuge to the Buddha. But who is the Buddha? Which Buddha do we go for Refuge to?

All Buddhists honour the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, but the various schools and traditions understand his role in diverse ways and assign him different positions. In large areas of the Buddhist world, Shakyamuni Buddha is given a place that is more or less secondary to other figures. For instance, in much Far Eastern Buddhism, the Buddha Amitabha has the pre-eminent position, while Tibetans will usually give prime honour to the founding gurus of their own schools, who are considered to have been Buddhas, and will also worship a rich pantheon of archetypal or visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

These figures have great spiritual relevance within those traditions – and it is important that their worship and contemplation is respected since they are embodiments of the essence of Enlightenment. However, they can be better understood and appreciated if they are placed carefully in relation to the Buddha Shakyamuni, in a way that reveals his full historical significance. Since the entire tradition emerges from his Enlightenment, we can most truly comprehend his teaching, and thereby discern our unity as Buddhists, when we see him as central. In addition, when we focus on the Buddha Shakyamuni, we make the Dharma more accessible to those who have had no previous contact with Buddhism by setting it within its historical context and demonstrating its relevance to them as human beings. For most people today, the gateway to the supra-historical is likely to be through history.

The Buddha Shakyamuni is the fountainhead of Buddhism. He rediscovered the Path and proclaimed it in this era. It is because of him that we know of the depths of Enlightenment represented by the visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas revealed in the Mahayana sutras and in the tantras – for they are expressions, on the level of uplifted imagination, of the spiritual wealth of the Enlightenment that he rediscovered. They themselves therefore find their significance through him. Indeed, the danger is that, without the historical context of Shakyamuni's Enlightenment, they come to be seen as mere god-figures, available for the magical manipulation of worldly life. This is all too commonly the case in traditional Buddhism today.

It is similarly important that the great gurus who founded particular schools are seen in a proper relationship to Shakyamuni. Such pre-eminent teachers have made enormous contributions to the tradition and are worthy of being honoured very highly indeed and their teachings studied very carefully. They are all, however, disciples of the Buddha himself and their particular presentations of the Dharma are explanations, explorations, or expansions of what he taught. Recognising this enables us to locate their teachings in the context of what the Buddha himself had to say and prevents us from losing the unity of the tradition through basing ourselves on relatively late approaches to the Dharma that are specific to certain historical and doctrinal circumstances.

A renewal of Buddhism starts with the Buddha Shakyamuni and his teachings, before the doctrinal developments of them that are so prominent in many schools. These later developments are not, however, necessarily to be discarded, by any means: they may contain teachings and practices that are very relevant today. A renewed Buddhism cannot be merely fundamentalist, purporting to maintain the authentic tradition unchanged since the time of the Buddha – that would be to ignore the vastly different circumstances we must practise in today and to waste the wealth of later spiritual experience, as well as to raise very large questions concerning historical evidence.

The starting point is as near as we can get to the Buddha himself and to what it seems almost certain that he did teach, found in the core of very early scriptures, preserved principally in the *nikāyas* of the Pali canon and in the *āgamas*, found in the Chinese canon and other such sources, mostly translated from the Sanskrit. This does not at all deny the value of later material but, insofar as it is later, it is a development on that core of the Buddha's own teaching and can only be fully understood, judged, and valued from that standpoint.

The Buddha to whom we go for Refuge is, in the first place, the founder of our traditions: the human, historical Shakyamuni. Seeing him as the primary object of Refuge allows us to make sense of developments that have taken place since his time; it enables us to appreciate the significance of the supra-historical, visionary figures that have emerged as expressions of the inner qualities of the Enlightenment he rediscovered; and it communicates clearly the inspiring potential that all human beings have. What is distinctive about Buddhism is that it offers us a vision of the highest possibilities that are open to humanity. The Buddha started as a human being, like us, and what he did we can do.

IV

Going for Refuge to the Dharma

The Dharma is the way things truly are, beyond all ordinary understanding, and it is by realising the Dharma directly for himself that Gautama became the Buddha Shakyamuni. Having achieved Liberation, the Buddha passed the remainder of his life communicating to others his fundamental insight into the nature of reality and teaching the Path that would lead them to share it. The Dharma is therefore also the body of teachings, practices, and institutions that constitute that Path to Enlightenment, based originally on the Buddha's own words.

On this much, all Buddhists can presumably, in essence, agree. But many different expressions of the Dharma have developed over the millennia, some of them, it would seem, mutually contradictory. This wealth, vast and various as it is both in its geographical breadth and its historical depth, is becoming available to us now as it has been to no Buddhists ever before. Modern Buddhists are, then, faced with the task of evaluating two thousand five hundred years of Buddhist development across much of Asia. We must distinguish what is true to the Dharma in that development from what is distorted or merely adventitious. We cannot accept uncritically everything that carries the label, 'Buddhist', from no matter what era or clime, because there is so much that is incidental or erroneous. Yet we cannot reject all but what belongs to one particular school – no modern school can be accepted as a 'pure tradition', unchanged since the time of the Buddha, no matter what its adherents might claim.

VALUING MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

Modern historical scholarship, which has contributed very significantly to our awareness of Buddhism's extent, offers a way forward. We can now gain some perspective, with growing accuracy, on how different schools came about in response to particular circumstances. **We can view the Buddhist tradition itself as a conditioned phenomenon, subject to the laws of dependent arising – of change, decay, and renewal – as the Buddha taught us that everything is.**

Buddhism has nothing to be afraid of in this respect: while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for the most part, rest upon the divine origins of their holy books, Buddhists can accept that, like all other things, the Tripitaka itself and the teachings it contains arose in dependence on

conditions. We have access to far more accurate historical and philological knowledge about the origins and nature of the Buddhist texts we have inherited than has been available since they were created. Even if this knowledge sometimes tends to undermine the traditional accounts of how the texts came about, it does not destroy their Dharmic worth as teachings about the goal and the Path. Once we have removed the veils of a shallow ‘sacredness’, we can better understand how and why we have got what now comes down to us and therefore can more easily assess its value to us now.

ADAPTATION, CREATIVE UNFOLDING, AND INTERNAL RENEWAL IN THE TRADITION

When we look at the tradition as a whole, from this point of view, we see three principal processes at work. The Buddha communicated the Dharma at a particular point in time against the background of particular cultural, economic, and political circumstances. While much that he said, as it has come down to us, requires no modification, he could not have spoken for all times and all places in the detail of his communication. The Buddha’s successors have had to **adapt to new circumstances**, especially as they encountered new cultures outside India, and have had to evolve new and appropriate ways of expressing the essential truths of the Dharma. Faithfulness to the Dharma does not mean merely preserving and continuing the forms in which it was originally presented – which would, ironically, be a form of bad faith. The tradition also evolved in many different directions as fresh Dharmic inspiration arose within it. Even the Buddha’s own teaching could not exhaust the infinite possibilities of the Dharma. The greatest of the Buddha’s heirs have unfolded more of the Dharma’s riches from their own **creative experience**. New dimensions of the truth have been revealed and more effective and uplifting ways of conveying it have developed. These new insights and expressions have helped to shape much of what we see in modern Buddhism.

Another process has also contributed to the rich variety of schools and traditions. Buddhism is not only in dialogue with the ever changing world around it, it is **in dialogue with itself**. There is an inevitable process of decay within the tradition, as power and status assert themselves, as misunderstandings become institutionalised, as one-sided emphases take on concrete form. These degenerations are also represented in the overall tradition as it comes down to us today. But so are the teachings that developed in order to correct them.

The tradition as a whole preserves those traces of decay as well as the signs of correction and renewal.

A CRITICAL ECUMENICISM

On this basis, we may establish the criteria for the Dharma in the present age. We can take an ecumenical approach, open to the totality of Buddhist tradition – but ecumenicism does not preclude intelligent discrimination: a **critical ecumenicism** is what is called for. What has come down to us has been subject to the processes of adaptation to new situations, of creative evolution, of degeneration and renewal. We can find much that is of great value everywhere in this inheritance, but what is valuable to us is to be distinguished from what is merely incidental, contaminated with non-Buddhist ideas, or even degenerate. But what is the touchstone of value? Scholarly research can help us here too, because it enables us to discern with a reasonable degree of accuracy what are the earliest texts that are most likely to represent something close to the Buddha's own words – although we can never be completely certain that we are encountering exactly the words he used or that we have an exhaustive account of what he said. These earliest texts contain all the basic teachings that are accepted by all schools and traditions. **This then gives us a basis for evaluating whether or not later developments are authentic expressions of the Dharma: do they conform to or conflict with what the Buddha himself taught, as represented by that earliest corpus of teachings?** The issue here is not whether or not the teaching is formally the same as what the Buddha taught, but whether or not it conforms to it in principle.

However, this test is not enough. Simply because a later teaching or practice does not conflict with what the Buddha taught does not mean it is useful. So much that is no longer spiritually efficacious might be preserved under that criterion. We need to see whether those later developments are really helpful now, as means of communicating the Buddha's understanding. Considering the situation in the world today, we have no time to waste in simply preserving the past. We need a presentation of the Dharma that will really work now to change the lives of many people.

We can base our presentation of the Dharma firmly on the core teachings of the Buddha himself and include whatever from any traditional source is found to be effective and in conformity with what we know the Buddha taught. It may also include new ways of communicating the teachings that emerge from the present situation – so long, again, as they are in conformity with the principles contained in the Buddha's own words.

NEITHER ETERNALIST NOR NIHILIST

The most important basic doctrinal criterion for evaluating teachings is the extent to which they conform to the Middle Way, taught by the Buddha as avoiding the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. His teaching represented a complete break with his Indian religious and intellectual background, which was one of intense metaphysical speculation. He himself rigorously resisted all such theorising beyond what was necessary to follow the Path and attain the Goal and fought a continuous battle against all kinds of speculative views, which he considered distracted from the task in hand or, worse, led astray, ethically and spiritually. His teaching of dependent arising points to the observable characteristic shared by all things, rather than to an ultimate reality within which all takes place or which is their true meaning. He considered such ‘eternalist’ views as leading easily to very negative ethical and spiritual consequences. He was not however a nihilist or materialist, which he saw as, if anything, more pernicious. He taught, from his own experience, that it is possible to follow a sequence of dependently arising states that leads to Liberation, the ultimate and most desirable good.

While no modern schools would deny the central importance of the Middle Way, especially as represented by the teaching of dependent arising, some of the ways the Dharma is discussed can stray towards one or other extreme. The trend seems to have started quite soon after the Buddha’s own Parinirvana, with the attempt to systematise his teachings, which in some cases fell into a quasi-realism. As time went on this trend became stronger and, in some later Mahayana and Vajrayana sources, there is terminology that suggests eternal metaphysical entities, even if that is not what was originally intended. There has been a contrary trend in other schools towards presenting the Buddha’s teaching in such a one-sidedly negative fashion, effectively as the denial of all life and feeling, that it becomes deeply unappealing. Both this quasi-eternalism and quasi-nihilism lose the spirit of the Buddha’s own message. Whatever the intention or understanding of their exponents, they slip away from the Middle Way.

The problem seems to have been that the full significance of dependent arising was not always appreciated. In many cases, even today, it is understood as referring simply to the chain of conditions that underlie our bondage in Samsara: the twelve-fold *nidāna* chain. The escape from Samsara is presented merely as the negation or undoing of these twelve links. Later traditions have tried to compensate for this rather bleak perspective through metaphysical explorations that sometimes rely on

terms that have an inescapably eternalist ring, if not understood correctly, whatever their original intention.

The whole Buddhist tradition emerges out of the Buddha's own fundamental insight into the conditioned nature of all things. If this is understood and presented correctly no more is required – indeed,

‘more’ often leads inexorably in the direction of eternalism or nihilism. Dependent arising includes both the cycles of Samsara and the spiralling progression of the Path that leads to Nirvana. Nirvana arises as the expositional end point of the sequence of dependently arising states that constitute the Path – it is the point at which language is finally defied, though it implies no stopping point. That sequence is dealt with in various ways in the Buddha's own teaching: for instance, as the three trainings of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā* – the Buddha's main topic during his last teaching journey. Most importantly, the Buddha discusses twelve progressive *nidānas* that lead to Liberation in two suttas of the Pali canon that seem largely to have escaped notice (see especially the *Upanisa Sutta*, Samyutta Nikāya, XII.23). Later traditions have their own sequences of dependently arising progressions, such as the ten Bodhisattva *bhūmis* or the various stages detailed in Vajrayana traditions, such as the Nine Yanas of the Nyingmapa – although these are not generally discussed in terms of dependent arising.

Dependent arising then does not merely characterise the chain that binds us to suffering. It includes also the Path by which we can escape from suffering. The total complex of conditioned processes includes two principal trends: a Samsaric and a Nirvanic. The Nirvanic trend is driven first of all by **skillful karma**. As we act more and more skilfully, more and more refined and sensitive states of mind emerge, which support a greater recognition of the truth. Once we see things as they really are at Stream Entry, a **Dharmic trend** takes over – we enter a stream that carries us on to Nirvana. What happens beyond Nirvana exhausts our understanding, but it should not be conceived either in eternalist or nihilist terms – at this point one can only have recourse to paradox or to symbol and myth.

All later teachings on the subject of the way things are can be tested against the Buddha's fundamental expression of his insight, the doctrine of dependent arising, seen in its fullness as encompassing both Samsara and Nirvana. This is the doctrinal departure point for a renewal of Buddhism.

A BALANCED APPROACH TO THE PRACTICE OF THE DHARMA

It is important that practice of the Dharma is balanced if it is to be relevant and effective in contemporary circumstances. Different schools within Buddhism have preserved different spiritual currents, many of which are significant for us today. Often these take the form of emphases on one or other aspect of Dharma teaching or practice. In traditional contexts these emphases have, at best, taken their place within a larger Buddhist culture that contained other balancing emphases. With the radical cultural shifts that have taken place worldwide in recent times, in which old patterns are being drastically eroded, traditional schools can be left with rather one-sided presentations. Some, for instance, emphasise study of the scriptures and commentaries at the expense of meditation, while others place so much importance on meditation that study is virtually excluded.

Others again give priority to ritual and ceremony, to following Vinaya rules and precepts, or to practical work, often minimising the importance of other aspects. Sometimes also, exclusive emphasis is given to one or other particular way of practising or one technique, which is claimed as the true and correct one, whether taught by the Buddha or a later teacher.

No particular practice or technique is supreme or universal.

Following the Path demands a total transformation of all aspects of the individual and that requires a balanced approach that will include a range of practices. In addition, at different stages of growth or under varying circumstances, the pattern of practice will probably need to change. What practices are engaged with by any individual will require constant monitoring to see that they are truly supporting development on the Path. One of the functions of Sangha, as we shall see later, is to ensure that each member is truly growing in the Dharma and growing in a balanced way.

One of the most important balances to be struck is that between personal transformation and altruistic activity. The Buddhist life is lived for the attainment of Bodhi, which consists in the final transcendence of all ego-clinging. The first and most important stage in real spiritual evolution is Stream Entry, when that ego-clinging is decisively broken. Once one lets go of that self-attachment, what is released is a stream of mental states that have less and less reference to self. In a phrase, what is unleashed once Insight is attained is selfless compassion. Striving for Enlightenment then must balance that quest for direct understanding of the unreal nature of the assumed metaphysical self with active giving up of

self to the service of the Dharma and, thereby, of all life. A one-sided stress on one or the other will distort spiritual practice and thereby limit its success.

RESTORING THE REALM OF IMAGINATION

Modern Buddhists face another very challenging issue. Traditionally Buddhists have accepted a rich and complex perspective on life, seeing existence peopled by incalculable numbers of sentient beings: beings such as animals and insects that occupy the same material world as us, as well as beings occupying other world-systems elsewhere in space. More especially, the tradition takes for granted a vast and complex array of spirits, demons, angels, gods, together with archetypal beings or visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, occupying other dimensions parallel to ours, sometimes overlapping with it. Existence has traditionally been viewed as stratified into layers of worlds of increasing subtlety and beauty, each with its own laws of space and time. From the Buddha's own day on, the existence of these beings and dimensions has been accepted quite literally.

Such beings and realms are integral to the Dharma as traditionally expressed, but they are in direct conflict with the prevailing 'scientific' world-view, which is predominantly materialist. What is modern Buddhism to make of this conflict between the traditional world-view and the one that is widely current?

There is little doubt that quite a bit of Buddhist culture could usefully be subjected to critical enquiry. A great deal of credulity and superstition encrusts what has come down to us and a quest for evidence and an examination of sources would clear away a great deal of cant. While much of this sort of material is colourful and engaging, there is quite a lot that encourages credulity, and perpetuates superstition and ignorance, which can all too easily be exploited by powerful interests and often, for instance, obstructs real social reform. However, truth is not merely of the five physical senses. It is integral to the Dharma that worlds beyond the senses exist – although we need a new language to speak of these worlds and a deeper ontology to understand the nature of their existence. **A key task for Buddhist renewal is to forge a language and ontology that finds a Middle Way between the superstition and ignorance so common in tradition and the reductive materialism of popular scientism.** The language of Imagination offers an immediate starting point for that process. Besides this philosophical task, there needs to be a renewed exploration of these dimensions from within our modern cultures. The primary means for such exploration is through the direct experience of

meditation. However, an important and more widely accessible means is available to us through art.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ART AND CULTURE

Buddhism has an exceptionally rich artistic and cultural history. We have inherited a vast wealth of sculpture, painting, architecture, literature, ceremony and ritual, dance and drama, and music and song.

Much of this has been produced in very different times, using very different materials and techniques from those common today. It has also been produced in relative isolation. Today Buddhist culture has been exposed to global culture, meeting influences from many different places and times. It is especially encountering a mass culture that is backed by an almost irresistible commercial force. It is no longer possible to reproduce unselfconsciously the forms of the past and yet it is not at all clear in what direction to look for a Buddhist cultural renewal.

Nonetheless, that quest for new and relevant cultural expressions of the Dharma is of foremost importance if Buddhism is to have a major impact on the world. The Dharma life is not a matter of will and intellect alone. Emotion and, above all, imagination are to be engaged if one is successfully to move forward on the Path. Culture speaks the language of the heart and of the imagination, and, if it expresses Buddhist values, influences the whole of society and enables individuals to practise the Dharma far more effectively.

The development of a contemporary Buddhist cultural expression involves the following considerations:

- Recognising the Dharmic significance of art and culture: Dharmic development naturally expresses itself in a deepening aesthetic sensibility;
- Accepting the potential of artistic creation as a means of Dharma practice, insofar as it reflects the exploration of deeper aspects of experience and leads to self-transcendence;
- Acknowledging the value of ancient Buddhist art and culture, as a source of inspiration, not merely of imitation;
- Appreciating the best of non-Buddhist culture: Great art expresses human values that transcend their context and touch those depths from which the Dharma comes. There are outstanding expressions of human aesthetic sensibility in many other religions, as well as in non-religious art. These can be valued as art, independent of their doctrinal or liturgical associations, and thereby as material for a Buddhist cultural renewal;

- Expressing the rich variety of human experience by embracing the best and most positive aspects of local culture and tradition, so long as it is compatible with the Dharma.

If these principles are applied in depth we can look to the emergence of new Buddhist cultures all over the world, and a strong Buddhist influence on the wider culture. This development will make it possible for more and more people to engage deeply with the Dharma and to live happy and meaningful lives.

Going for Refuge to the Sangha

The Sangha as a refuge cannot be identified with any human institution or any particular school or tradition. The Sangha Refuge is a basis for complete confidence because it consists of all those men and women down the ages who have gained transcendental insight. Only they can be fully trusted as infallible sources of guidance and example, by virtue of their having seen the way things truly are. When we say, ‘To the Sangha for Refuge I Go’, it is the Sangha of those who have attained Stream Entry or beyond, the members of the Arya or Bodhisattva Sangha, to which we are committing ourselves. In going for Refuge to the Bodhisattva or Arya Sangha, we are:

- Drawing on the guidance and example of its members;
- Deriving confidence that the Dharma is a true Path to Liberation because there are people who have trodden the Path and realised its goal;
- Gaining inspiration to create the kind of ideal and harmonious society the Sangha represents – a pattern for all human collective life.

All Buddhists today would probably share this understanding of the Sangha Jewel, at least theoretically. However, in some areas of the Buddhist world, the Sangha has come to be identified almost exclusively with the monastic Sangha, whether or not that is explicitly stated. Of course, renunciation is a very important aspect of the Dharma life and those who have gone forth from home into homelessness have opportunities for practising the Dharma that householders will often not have. It should also be stressed that there are many excellent monks and nuns who practise the Dharma wholeheartedly and do their best to spread it vigorously.

Nonetheless, an over-valuation of monasticism often distorts the Buddhist community to the detriment of all. Monks – and, much less commonly, nuns – may then be given honour and economic support regardless of their true worth as spiritual practitioners. So long as they wear the robe and do not too obviously breach the Vinaya, they are likely to be treated as teachers and exemplars. Quite a number therefore do little to deserve the respect and dana they receive and do not contribute much to the practice and spread of the Dharma.

The effect on lay people can be equally harmful. Quite a number of lay people have learned that their only role in the Dharma is the support of the

monastic Sangha. They believe that by giving dana to the monks they will gain merit, which will help them in this life and the next. This relieves them of responsibility for more intensive practice of the Dharma.

This ‘merit economy’ can then feed the worldly interests of both lay and monastic, trapping them in a superstitious symbiosis that undermines Buddhist practice. Often this system is tied up with outdated economic and social structures and is thus defenceless in the face of urbanisation, industrialisation, and the growing democratic spirit.

While there are many exceptions to this analysis, both among monks and nuns and among lay people, it is quite commonly true. This notion of Sangha is quite unfit for the task that Buddhism now faces.

The most urgent task for the renewal of Buddhism is the renewal of Sangha.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SANGHA

The Arya or Bodhisattva Sangha is our Refuge, but we need Sangha in a more immediate sense. It is very difficult indeed to practise as Buddhists without a social context that is geared to the Dharma. **We need companions on the Path who can encourage and support us at every stage.**

Practising the Dharma is not at all easy, especially because it goes against conventional norms: most people consider that the important issues of life are simply survival, reproduction, and worldly success and they do not hold strongly any ethical or spiritual values – whatever ceremonies they may undertake or offerings they may give. There is seldom much sympathy, outside societies that preserve traditional Buddhist culture, for those who want to live a Dharma life. If we are to make genuine progress on the Path, we need to be in deep connection with those who see things in the same way that we do and who will therefore understand and assist our efforts.

Not only does Sangha give us moral support, it is itself one of the chief arenas for our practice. The purpose of Dharma practice is going beyond our narrow self-attachment, which, according to the Buddha, is the source of all our suffering. We transcend self-attachment by cultivating the selfless emotions of *maitrī* and compassion, not merely in the meditation hall but in our daily lives. The Sangha, in the form of our own immediate circle of Dharma companions, offers us the best opportunity to learn to live and work closely with others in deep and loving harmony. It does so through example and guidance, and through all the practices of Sangha – notably of confession, which enables us to face up to and

overcome our own unskilful actions. Sangha members can mutually reflect each other so that all may discover how to practise the Dharma more deeply. Such an active Dharmic culture within the Sangha ensures that teachings and practices remain truly effective and do not become mere formalities.

Furthermore, a successful Sangha is an example to all of what the whole of society could be.

This is very urgently needed in a consumerist world in which there is an increasing erosion of collective life lived on the basis of genuine values. People need to see actual examples of friendship and harmony in a context of high ideals and ethical living, so that they too can have the courage to lead better lives. Not only is a Sangha an example, from it comes guidance and teaching for those who themselves want to lead a Dharma life.

It should also be said that **if a Sangha is a genuine Sangha it will be a source of delight and happiness to all who participate in it.** This is the kind of Sangha the world needs today.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Sangha is a general principle that is put into effect especially through particular relationships between Sangha members. Traditionally the Sangha relationship that has most often been stressed is that between teacher and disciple. Although the relationship with a teacher is a very important one and many examples can be found of its great effectiveness, there is frequently a strong emphasis on its formal aspects, involving little meaningful human contact. It can also be abused, too often being based upon power, rather than on *maitrī*, which from the social point of view is the essence of the Dharma.

What needs to be stressed in a renewal of Buddhism is *kalyāṇa mitratā*, ‘lovely friendship’ or ‘friendship in the beautiful’, which signifies friendship in the Dharma: whether between more experienced and less so or between those of more or less equal experience. Teacher and pupil should be friends – the Dharma can only truly be taught and practised in this context.

Friendship is a rich and highly desirable human experience that is made all the more precious by being practised in the context of the Dharma. It has a number of components: shared values and ideals, deep sympathy and liking, mutual knowledge and understanding, cooperation and helping one another, and faithfulness. The quality that makes it possible is communication – which is more than the mere exchange of information: it

is a mutual awareness and responsiveness, which can take one very far indeed beyond self-attachment. **Indeed communication and friendship are among the most powerful Dharma methods we have – as well as being among the most important and delightful fruits of Dharma practice.**

The experience of friendship and the development of communication are the basis for Sangha. Although organisation is vitally important for the spreading of the Dharma, organisation is secondary to friendship and Sangha. **Organisations will only be Dharmically effective if they are formed out of Sangha.** The very active work that is needed to make the Dharma much more widely known in the modern world needs to be done on the basis of Sangha in a spirit of friendship.

SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT NOT LIFESTYLE IS THE TEST OF SANGHA

Throughout the Buddhist world, the principal distinction within the community is between monastics and householders. But this is not really the most important issue. **The key question is the degree to which an individual Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels** – to what extent they are genuinely committed to the Buddhist Path. We have already seen that going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life. What makes you a Buddhist is that you actively practise the Dharma in harmony with others as disciples of the Buddha. A Buddhist is one who effectually treads the Path and is thereby making progress towards Buddhahood. This can be done whether or not one is wearing a robe, as is evidenced by the many lay disciples in the Buddha's own time who achieved transcendental attainment. Indeed, many who wear a robe make no effective effort on the Path at all – and many progress spiritually who have never worn a robe.

The Arya or Bodhisattva Sangha apart, the Sangha that is most significant consists of all those who are putting their going for Refuge to the Three Jewels into effect, regardless of whether they are monastic or lay. A sincerely committed monk has far more in common with a sincerely committed laywoman than he does with his monastic brothers who are merely wearing the robe for the sake of the security and status it confers. A renewed Sangha needs to come together on the basis of commitment, not lifestyle.

SANGHA UNITED ON THE BASIS OF COMMITMENT

Commitment is the fundamental criterion for entry into the Sangha, not any other consideration, such as lifestyle, gender, nationality, education,

race, or social class or caste. In the first place, this means that there can be no hierarchical distinction between monastics and lay people. **All are equal members of a single Sangha, so long as they are genuinely and effectively committed to the Three Jewels**, in the sense of systematically applying themselves to the practice of the Dharma. ‘Sangha’ does not merely mean the monastic Sangha – most commonly the Bhikshu Sangha, thereby excluding the nuns – but the community of all those who go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha to an effective degree.

This is especially significant as regards the place of women in the Sangha. The traditional Buddhist world generally assigns a lesser place to women: according to all Vinayas, the most senior nun must defer to the most junior monk. These traditions came from social and economic circumstances very different from our own, in which women are able to play a full and equal part in social, cultural, economic, and political life. A renewed Sangha should accept people simply on the basis of their commitment, not their gender – although there may well be situations where men and women wish to live or practise separately, for obvious practical reasons. No superiority, whether spiritually or organisationally, should attach to anyone simply because they are a man or a woman.

The Sangha transcends the categories of the world. Relationships within the Sangha are based on people’s commitment, their moral and spiritual worth, not the accidents of nationality, race, or economic class. **The ideal Sangha is one that crosses as many boundaries as possible, so that the status accorded by birth is broken down.** For a modern Sangha, one of the most powerful practices is bringing people together from many different backgrounds, especially internationally, and practising the Dharma together simply as individuals who go for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

SUTRA-STYLE MONASTICISM

While a renewed Sangha would not accord special status to anyone simply on the basis of their lifestyle, nonetheless **renunciation is to be highly valued and supported**: that is, the renunciative lifestyle is to be valued in itself, although the individuals who profess it can only be valued according to their own moral and spiritual worth, not the way of life they profess. Renunciation is essential to the Dharma life: in order to make progress on the Path, one renounces the world as much as possible, with all its enticements to attachment. It is very valuable indeed that some people choose to live without so many of the things that bind most of us into Samsara.

However, monasticism in the Buddhist world is in urgent need of renewal, dominated as it can be by formalism, compromise with authority, and concern with property and even wealth – and at times by outright hypocrisy. Because the following of sets of Vinaya rules, established in quite different historical circumstances, has become the key definer of monasticism, its underlying meaning and purpose is frequently lost. Becoming a monk or nun in reality means renouncing family and possessions so that one can go for Refuge wholeheartedly and with as little distraction as possible. We need a new style of Buddhist monasticism, based not on Vinaya rules, though drawing on their spirit, but on the principles of the Buddha's own way of life, in accordance with modern circumstances.

We need what could be called '**sutra-style' monasticism** – inspired by the way of life of the Buddha's companions as depicted in the early discourses. It is best to be cautious about legislating as to how 'sutra-style' monks and nuns should behave, because circumstances vary so much – and because legislation always offers the opportunity for keeping the letter while breaking the spirit, as is often the case with the following of the Vinaya rules. We can however discern five principles at work in the life of a successful renunciant in this sense:

- **Chastity:** *brahmacharya* is the defining feature of monasticism, but it means more than mere abstention from sexual activity. It refers to a highly positive state of freedom from craving. Those leading a monastic life should not merely be chaste, but should be happily so. Too many monks and nuns either hypocritically compromise their vows in various ways or else are unhappily chaste, with all the psychological and behavioural consequences that repression can bring;

- **Fewness of possessions:** the 'sutra-style' monk or nun limits what they own to what they immediately and genuinely need for their physical survival and the carrying out of their work for the Dharma;

- **Simplicity of lifestyle:** this is especially important and especially difficult in the complex and busy modern environment. It essentially means eliminating from one's life whatever is unnecessary to Dharma practice, so that one is not wasting one's time on the mere business of accumulation and safeguarding of possessions or in activities that are distractions. Simplicity of lifestyle does not mean deprivation or degradation: a simple life should be healthy and full of uncomplicated, dignified, and inexpensive beauty – an 'elegant simplicity'. It could also be said that this principle, combined with the others, is 'environmentally friendly', for the sutra-style monastic has left the consumerist system that is the primary cause of our current environmental crisis;

• **Careerlessness:** One takes up the monastic life so that one may devote all one's time and energy to the Dharma. One may, of course, need to take paid employment to earn enough to live on, but one's work is not an alternative focus for one's energies or a means of furthering worldly ambition. For those engaged in Buddhist activities, there is a special danger: they should take care not to make a career out of monastic life, channelling ambition into ecclesiastical advancement and power;

• **Community living:** The monk or nun has renounced marriage and family but still needs friendship, emotional warmth, and intimacy. Such social support and engagement will come from those who share the same way of life, living together in residential spiritual communities. Without this kind of community, it is very difficult to maintain a celibate life and one risks either abandoning it or maintaining it with some degree of emotional and instinctual repression.

Those who take the vow of *brahmacharya* do so in the context of the precepts that all Buddhists should try to follow. They take the vow as a special and more intense practice of the third precept of refraining from sexual misconduct that is common to all. It is important that this is born in mind. Every genuine Buddhist is practising ethics, including in the area of sexual conduct. Indeed, **every Buddhist also needs to live as much as they can by the other principles outlined above: fewness of possessions, simplicity of lifestyle, careerlessness, and, if not community living, then active participation in a Sangha in a context of deep friendship.**

CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF LIFE

The changed cultural, social, and economic circumstances of the modern world demand that Buddhists today develop new institutions for living the Dharma life. This is especially important because it is now clear that the way of life in rich countries – a way of life to which people in emerging economies understandably aspire and are rapidly gaining access – is the major driver of our environmental problems and of much geopolitical tension. Modern economies depend upon increasing consumer demand to drive economic growth – and that growth requires the use of more energy and resources, which in turn leads to more climate-changing carbon use and more tension-building competition for scarce commodities. It seems that our present way of life is simply not tenable indefinitely. **Buddhists can demonstrate a genuinely alternative way of life that lives lightly on the planet and that is more truly satisfying than the deliberately stimulated discontent that is the fundamental basis of our present system.**

Despite much in the world today that is problematic for the leading of the Dharma life, it also has advantages that can be exploited in the creation of new Buddhist institutions. The greater flexibility and freedom to be found in many societies today offers new opportunities. Traditionally, Buddhists have only had two options: lay life or becoming a monk or nun. Now, for many people, there is a wider range of possibilities.

It is important that those who are able to lead a monastic life in an authentic way are encouraged and assisted to do so. Nonetheless, there are some, perhaps many, who would like to dedicate themselves to a full time Dharma life, but who cannot observe *brahmacharya* without undue strain or the hypocrisy so common in present monastic Sanghas. For most in that position today, there is no option but to marry, because of prevailing conventions in their societies, yet marriage in such circumstances usually restricts Dharma practice, to a greater or lesser extent. However it is now possible in some areas of the world to live a ‘**semi-renunciant**’ lifestyle, applying the five principles mentioned above much more fully than can be done in a family, yet not as fully as a monk or nun. Whether this is feasible or not depends on prevailing social conventions and economic conditions, but in many countries today it is possible, for instance, to live a community life, without being celibate. It is certainly possible for Buddhists to work together. And a new kind of social life can be created, in which even families work very differently from the current norms. These are new opportunities that Buddhists today are exploring.

It is especially important now to find **alternative living situations**, because of the decay of the traditional family in many cultures and the growth of increasingly isolated family units, which have less and less connection with their neighbours. This ‘nuclear family’ set-up is often unhealthy for all concerned. Urban life for many all over the world is now often lonely and socially fragmented. These conditions are especially unsuitable for those trying to lead a Dharma life, who need the warmth, support, encouragement, and stimulation of fellow Dharma-practitioners and opportunities for developing deep spiritual friendship. A renewed Buddhism can explore different ways for people to live together: for instance, as already mentioned, semi-monastic residential communities for those who are unmarried but do not wish to take up the practice of *brahmacharya* – whether they might do so at some later stage or not. For obvious reasons, these often work best if they are for men and women separately. There is also the possibility of residential communities for those with families – although, for practical reasons, these are usually more difficult to establish.

One of the most important areas that a modern Buddhism needs to address is **economic life**. Most people spend a large proportion of their lives in paid employment, often in unpleasant, boring, or stressful activity. Furthermore, their work often has no connection with their Dharma life and may even compromise their ethical principles. New business institutions need to be formed that enable committed Buddhists to transform their working lives into spiritual practice.

There are a number of principles to be taken into account in establishing such businesses:

- **Right Livelihood:** Whatever activity is undertaken should not breach the ethical precepts and principles laid down by the Buddha in the Noble Eightfold Path;

- **Dana:** The work done should make a genuine contribution to the world, whether by fulfilling some basic need, helping to relieve suffering, or making a financial surplus that can be used to spread the Dharma;

- **Creativity:** As far as possible the work should be fulfilling for those who engage in it, both for the dana end that it serves and for its own sake;

- **Community:** All working for the enterprise should collectively constitute a Sangha at work, everyone sharing a common spiritual perspective and practice;

- **Spiritual practice:** There should be an effort to transform the work itself into a means of practising the Dharma, promoting mindfulness, emotional positivity, inspiration, and insight into the nature of things, as well as a sense of self-transcending service.

Every Buddhist should aim to fulfil as many of these principles as possible in their own working lives.

A renewed Buddhism needs to offer **an alternative cultural and social life**. The books we read, the films we watch, and the music we listen to all have an effect on our attitudes and understanding. Culture shapes consciousness very powerfully. As we have seen, culture can be a medium for Dharma practice, and at the least can greatly support it. Modern civilisation makes entertainment and distraction available with astonishing ease at a very low cost to a very large proportion of the population. Even very poor people have relatively easy access to multi-channel television and the latest popular songs. Most of what is on offer is of no great cultural worth and indeed often communicates the shallowest of consumerism and the most worldly of values.

Within most countries, more worthwhile culture is available for those that seek it, but a new Buddhism needs to make it easily accessible and to relate it to Dharma life. This should be one of the functions of Dharma centres; the primary purpose of such centres is teaching and practising Buddhism, but they need also to serve a social and cultural function. Those trying to follow the Path need opportunities for gathering with those who share their commitment. And they need opportunities for cultural experience other than the mere entertainment or distraction that fills so much of the media. These Dharma centres should offer access to films, plays, poetry, music, and visual art that communicate the Dharma's truths, albeit not in the formal terms of Buddhism. They should help to educate the aesthetic sensibility of their members, so that they are better able to appreciate artistic experiences of a kind that reveals more of the real nature of things.

One of the most challenging cultural issues facing Buddhists today is the power of modern technology and its influence on human experience. The technology we use has a strong effect on consciousness in various ways, and this needs to be confronted and explored. Modern Buddhism needs to offer guidance on **how to live with technology**, taking advantage of its benefits and avoiding its malign effects. At the same time, a renewed Buddhism needs to use the modern media to get its message across. There is no inherent reason why film, television, radio, and the internet cannot communicate the Dharma. Indeed, the way new communication technology has developed generally makes it easier and cheaper to use. **Buddhists can have a very wide effect if they capture as much space as they can in the new media with items that are well presented, engaging, and genuinely inspiring.**

A renewed Buddhism needs to confront the modern world as it is, with intelligence and resourcefulness. This involves using opportunities that arise in contemporary circumstances to develop a complete way of life based on the Dharma that is a genuine alternative to consumer society. That way of life requires the support of a range of institutions such as communities, Right Livelihood businesses, and Dharma centres that together constitute a kind of new or model society, in the midst of the wider society – the **nucleus of a new society** worldwide. This has three functions:

- Providing resources for those already committed to the Dharma to make further progress on the path;
- Creating bases for spreading the Dharma much more widely throughout the world;

- Demonstrating alternatives to consumer society that can model what the whole world could become.

In the world today these Buddhist societies within the wider society could be seen as replicating the function performed by monasteries in many traditional Buddhist cultures. They would provide rallying points and points of departure: oases where all may find refreshment and bases from which the entire desert may be made to bloom.

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

The ultimate aspiration of the Sangha is to turn society everywhere into a new society: to transform the whole world into the land of the Dharma – into a ‘Pure Land’. Impossibly distant, even Quixotic, as that goal may be, Buddhists should never rest until it is achieved – traditionally it is said that many have devoted themselves to this task even lifetime after lifetime and there is no reason why Buddhists today should not have that same perspective. In more immediate and practical terms, this means that, once the environments have been established that support the lives and Dharma practice of the committed core, every effort will be given to transforming the surrounding society. This requires us to address very directly the situation all around, actively seeking to change it for the better on the basis of the Dharma.

The first duty in this respect is to make the Dharma available in as clear and accessible a form as possible as widely as possible. We need especially to be appealing to all those who feel some urge for a more meaningful life. Many, many people feel deep disquiet because they lack answers to fundamental questions about life. Many are no longer convinced by the solutions offered by the religions they have grown up with. Many are disillusioned by lives lived merely to meet the expectations of convention. However they lack guidance and encouragement to give their lives to something more fulfilling. The Dharma can feed their hunger and the Sangha can support them in their struggles for a better life. We need to be actively reaching out to as many such people as possible.

If a large number of people do lead a Dharma life in this way to any extent this will have a very big effect on society as a whole. However it is not enough to await that day. **Many everywhere at this moment suffer terribly, through injustice, violence, poverty, exclusion, and prejudice. It is our compassionate duty to help them escape their suffering now.** This can be done in two ways: by giving them the direct material aid they need to meet their difficulties and by helping them to help themselves in the future. Buddhists can do both.

We have before us an important example of the power of the Dharma to transform the lives of the severely disadvantaged. In 1956, millions of Indian ‘Dalits’ – oppressed people from the lowest castes – converted to Buddhism, under the leadership of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, to escape the stigma of ‘Untouchability’, to which they had been condemned under the Hindu caste system. In the succeeding fifty years, they have very substantially changed their status because of the courage and confidence that the Dharma has given them.

Poverty and oppression leave people feeling passive and fatalistic, very often, especially when they are taught that acceptance is their religious duty, as for instance those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are told in India. The most basic message of the Dharma is that we are each responsible for our own future. Of course we cannot be held accountable for being born into poverty or being the butt of others’ prejudice but we can determine how we respond to our situation and how we escape our disadvantages. The Dharma directly denies doctrines of natural inequality. One human being is not better than another simply because he or she is born into a wealthier or more powerful class, caste, or race. What makes one human being better than another is their moral worth, not their birth.

The message of the Dharma gives an immediate sense of confidence and of moral self-reliance, without preaching violence or disharmony. This has a very great impact. It gives people the courage to lift themselves out of deprivation and oppression through their own efforts, just as Dr Ambedkar’s followers have done since their conversion – which is much more effective in the long term than being helped out by others. This message needs to be heard far more widely by those many people all over the world who are excluded from the benefits of the societies they live in.

The Dharma can help those who are downtrodden to lift themselves up, but Buddhists also need to address the system in which some are forced to suffer at the hands of others. **A renewed Buddhism needs to recognise the nature of society and its own role within it.** Society is sustained not so much by the system by which it is governed or the framework of law by which order is kept – although these have a very significant effect. Even a good constitution and good laws can be corrupted by a bad society. It is the values shared by the majority of citizens, and especially the most influential ones, that are the real determiners of the worth of a society. A just and free society arises because citizens generally value justice and freedom and will themselves act on that basis without the coercion of the law.

Values such as freedom and justice are themselves underlain by more fundamental views about the nature and meaning of human life and of our

relationship to one another. The way we understand life determines our values and that guides our behaviour. The view of the greatest number will determine the values that generally prevail and the social relations that will result. **The task of Buddhists is to promote the Dharmic view of life and the values that flow from it.** We can try to inject into the public discussion the Dharmic understanding of the way life really is. We can communicate as widely as possible that actions have consequences in accordance with their skilful or unskilful nature. The law of karma simply describes what happens: it is the moral law that describes how our own actions affect us in the future, just as the law of gravity describes what happens to a stone when it is dropped. For Buddhists, morality is part of the way things are. We need to communicate that perspective as widely as possible.

We also need to communicate that human beings are capable of spiritual growth and that that growth consists essentially in self-transcendence. Such growth for a human being is as essential as it is for a plant – by which it follows that lack of growth is unnatural and will have malign consequences. We grow in accordance with certain laws implicit in the way things are. Our human growth obeys the principle of conditionality: the Path itself is governed by laws. We need simply to apply the laws of growth to our own lives. We will then find ourselves experiencing greater and greater happiness and fulfilment.

The ultimate meaning and purpose of human society is the growth of the individuals within it – growth in creativity, love, compassion, and wisdom. If that growth is taking place among large numbers of people, society will be stable because basic human values will be widely shared, moderating competing interests.

If Buddhism is renewed, it can more easily make its influence strongly felt within societies all over the world, asserting values that promote the well-being of all. This requires that Buddhists have a voice within politics, the media, and the arts. Buddhism could promote values of tolerance and equality, ensuring that no one suffers unnecessarily for the accidents of their birth: race, colour, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability. It could promote peace and harmony and a spirit of friendliness and cooperation throughout society. And it could promote culture, learning, and the arts as means to a higher human life.

Buddhism has traditionally worked within whatever political and social system it has found itself, having started in the growing monarchies of the Ganges plain. But it can embrace modern democracy wholeheartedly, because democracy at its best is founded upon values that Buddhism wholeheartedly upholds: respect for every individual regardless of birth,

moral freedom and responsibility, social harmony. What is more, democracy needs the Dharma very urgently.

If democracy is to be something more than merely an arena of competing self-interest, it needs a shared set of ideals.

The world is increasingly pluralistic and it is less and less possible to found nations on racial or historical-cultural values. There needs to be a larger vision of human existence that animates the democratic process: a vision of the common good in terms that are more than merely material. This the Dharma offers supremely, and it does it basing itself not on belief in revelation or authority, but on an analysis of the nature of life that is accessible to reason and that can be confirmed in experience.

The Dharma breathes the spirit of the age and gives it its best expression. It is our duty to make the Dharma heard.

The principles of a Buddhist renewal

The principles outlined in this manifesto are those upon which the Triratna Buddhist Community is founded and they are the basis upon which we try to work together. Since the foundation of our community, we have had some success in creating the kind of Buddhist movement these principles point to – although there is so much that does not live up to these ideals and so much more to be done.

Even though, inevitably in this short booklet, these principles are set out in brief and without full explanation or argument, we believe that they apply to Buddhism as a whole. We therefore invite dialogue with all Buddhists who share with us the desire to make the medicine of the Dharma as widely available as possible in the modern world and who want to renew the Buddhist tradition so that it can make a substantial difference today. If enough of us are engaged together in this renewal we may be able to make a major contribution to the future of humanity in these critical times.

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